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Outback Rainbow

DOROTHY CORK



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"You've always been secure and pampered"

Jarrett Buchan's words stung. He believed Nicky was just like his spoiled sister.

Nicky thought of the foster home in which she'd spent her early years--the fears and the loneliness; and she remembered only too well.

But how could the boss of an outback cattle station ever understand the feelings that drove the woman she had become? Well, Jarrett could think what he liked. She wasn't about to enlighten him!

CHAPTER ONE

IT was lucky for Nicky, while she was visiting Alice Springs with Guy Sonder, that Juliet rang her up at the motel to beg her, '*Please come to Coochin Brim-brim with me, Nicky. I can't face it alone, and Jarry insists that I come.*'

If that hadn't happened, she'd have been hurried back to Adelaide and she would never have found Cass and Howard again.

Guy had already told her, 'You'll never find them, Nich- ola. Don't you realise the Northern Territory is big—really big? There's more than half a million square miles of it.' Nicky knew that, but if you were looking for people you loved, and if you believed as Nicky did that fate meant you to find just one special person—like Howard Johnston— then the thought of half a million square miles didn't frighten you. It would happen somehow. It had to...

In Alice, she had gone with Guy straight to the house that had been her home from when she was five till she was going on for fourteen. The cottage parents had been constantly changing even when she was there, so it was no surprise when it was a stranger and not 'Aunty' Pat who came to the door. Disappointingly, though, there was no record of the past, nothing at all to tell what had become of Cass and Howdie Johnston. She didn't suppose anyone would now know, either, that a girl called Nichola Iris Reay had once lived there and then, incredibly, been whisked away to boarding school in Adelaide, and a new life that bore absolutely no resemblance to the one she had led in Alice.

Guy had hated visiting the foster-home, seeing the little children chasing each other round the untidy yard, and seeing, too, the rather bare institutional look inside. Nicky knew it without his saying a word. He didn't like the idea that she had spent years of her life in such a place, and he couldn't wait to get away from the reality of it.

For her part, Nicky had never dreamed in those days that she would one day come back with a handsome opal buyer of thirty, or that she would be wearing a big shady picture hat, tiny gold earrings, and a fragile white broderie anglaise dress.

'Are you satisfied now?' he had asked as he helped her back into the hired car parked in hot sunshine by the kerb.

Of course she wasn't satisfied, and already her thoughts had run on ahead. The Johnstons' father had run a store and petrol station a hundred miles or so up the bitumen on the way to Darwin, and she smiled at Guy ruefully. 'I could ask at the Red Lily store up the track. Please—could we go there?'

'Okay, honey.' His acquiescence was resigned, halfhearted. He was prepared to humour her, but he wanted to get it over. She might be just nineteen and only out of school since the end of last year, but she was well aware how he felt. She was well aware, too, that he planned to leave Alice with her the following morning, feeling that his duty had been done. But he didn't know that she was steeling herself to resist.

They drove north through the heat of the day and found the store. It had an unexpectedly newish look about it, and a big sign announced to the traveller, 'Petrol—Accommodation—Meals—Refreshments.' It didn't take long to discover that the Johnstons had gone. The new proprietor was called Capper, and a small bright-looking blonde girl who looked about sixteen offered the information that the Johnstons had started a business in Darwin, and she could let Nicky have their address and telephone number.

'Now for God's sake, Nichola,' Guy said, irritable now, 'Darwin's almost a thousand miles on. You won't want to go *there*--'

'Not without checking,' she agreed with a sigh. She had tossed her picture hat on to the back seat, and she ran her fingers through her curling copper-brown hair as Guy turned the car. She was sure that Cass and Howard wouldn't be in Darwin. Their stepmother, Ruby, had never wanted them, which was why they had been relegated to the foster home. But their father might know where they were.

He didn't, however. She rang through from the motel in Alice when they returned late that evening. It was a woman who answered. 'Ruby Johnston here.'

'I'm Nicky Reay,' Nicky said politely. 'I'm an old friend of Cass's, Mrs Johnston. Could you please tell me where she and Howard are now? I'm in Alice Springs--'

'I can't tell you a thing,' Cass's stepmother interrupted sharply, 'Why the hell do you think *we'd* know where those two are? We haven't heard from them in years.' Bang! She slammed the receiver down, and Nicky grimaced. Guy had heard that coarse, raucous voice, and he was not impressed.

'You're wasting your time,' he said shortly. 'I can't afford another day. You'll have to forget it and resign yourself to going home tomorrow. You're just chasing moonbeams, you know. As one grows up one has to accept the fact that one loses touch with many of one's childhood friends.'

'Are you telling me that?' she flashed back, her cheeks flushed, her pretty heart-shaped face turned to his. 'When you've spent eight or nine years of your childhood with cottage parents, and seen dozens of kids you've come to think of as your brothers and sisters just disappear overnight, you do rather get used to the fact that one loses touch.'

'Okay, okay.' Guy's shoulders in the expensively cut soft cotton shirt lifted in a shrug. 'Don't get uptight about it. I'm sorry. But it doesn't alter the fact that you can't go back to a past that doesn't exist any more. That's what you've got to face up to ... Now run off and take a shower and get ready for dinner. I'm going to phone through and confirm our flight bookings for tomorrow.'

'Not mine,' Nicky said stiffly. 'I'm not going.'

'I'm afraid you are,' he countered coolly. 'I'm not leaving you here on your own.' He turned his back and lifted the telephone receiver again—they were in his motel unit—and after a second she left, with a feeling of despair, and went to her own unit, a few doors along from his. It didn't matter what Guy said, for her the past did exist. For her, Cass and Howard were family—the only family she had ever had. Jack, her guardian, had always kept his distance. Guy, Nicky thought broodingly, would like all her past, up to the time she was fourteen, to be obliterated-. He didn't like any of it. He hated, and never mentioned, the fact that her father had been a crocodile shooter up at the Top End, and a mate of Jack's, who was—rough. It puzzled her, in these circumstances, that he seemed to have ideas of marrying her, once she had forgotten Alice Springs and acquired, as his sister Claudia had said, a little polish and sophistication. She had learned of his feelings only two weeks ago, when Jack Lane had died and she had wept in his arms and he had kissed her for the first time. He had groaned against her hair, 'Oh God, why does it have to be you, Nichola? You just—turn me on.'

Thinking about it later, when she was calmer, Nicky had wondered at her own lack of reaction, and reached the conclusion that she was safe from him because of the funny warm melting feeling she always experienced when she thought of Howdie Johnston. Anyhow, Guy hadn't said anything more, not specifically. She had been stupefied when she learned that Jack had named him as her guardian if he died while she was still young, and she was even more stupefied when he

saw the size of the bank balance that Jack had been holding in trust for her and that Guy Sonder was now to administer until she was twenty-one, or until she married—with his consent and approval. Jack had left her some opals too, faced, polished, and ready to be set. He had been the sort of man people called a rough diamond, and thought he had been responsible for Nicky since she was three years old, she scarcely knew him. She hadn't even known' that he wasn't her uncle until the one and only time she went to stay with him in Coober Pedy, where he was mining for opal.

She had been a quiet little girl with red-gold hair that had gradually darkened to deepest auburn. Lost, lonely, looking for brothers and sisters in the other children at the foster-home—children whose parents didn't want them, or were having problems and for one reason or another couldn't cope with family life. She had vague memories, that grew vaguer still as the years went by, of another life lived away from the town—with Jack, but she didn't know who else. When Nicky was about nine, Jack turned up in Alice and gave her a little silver ring with a glinting milky stone in it—an opal. And then he disappeared from her life again till a year or two later, when he took her to Coober Pedy for a few days during the school vacations.

It had been exciting to find that he lived in an underground house cut out of the sandstone into a low hillside. Gypsum glinted from the rough walls, there were air funnels in the roof instead of windows, there was a stove and a fridge—and a bed for Nicky which was pretty nearly as comfortable as the one she slept in in Alice! Coober Pedy was a real frontier town—ugly and incredibly bare and dusty, and full of rough characters who drove beat-up old cars that often didn't even carry a number plate. There were stores, minute and cluttered, that sold everything, and made Nicky think of scenes from old Western movies she'd seen on television in Alice. Jack wouldn't let her go anywhere at all on her own, and once when she was with him she saw a sign outside a mine that said, 'Moonlighters will be shot at'.

Jack's own mine was several miles from the town, and he had taken her to see that and told her he'd struck a bit of opal.

'How would you like to go and live in Adelaide, Rainbow?' he'd asked. 'Go to a boarding school for young ladies and have lots of pretty dresses and all that? It could happen—I've got Lady Luck on my side now.'

She had stared at him round-eyed, unable to imagine such a thing, and she'd asked instead of answering, 'Why do you call me Rainbow?'

'Because your mother did.'

'Was she your sister, then?'

'No, your dad and I were mates, that's all.'

'Why don't—didn't they want me?'

'Now what gave you that idea, Rainbow? You bet they wanted you, but they died, see.'

'How?' she had asked quaveringly. 'What happened?'

'Nick—your dad—he was killed in an accident.' Jack stopped, and she looked at his leathery brown face anxiously until he continued reluctantly. 'Your mother died soon after, of grieving and a broken heart—though the doc gave it some fancy name. She left you in my care. She was one of the Wests from Kooriekirra cattle station, Iris was.'

'Was she?' It didn't mean anything to Nicky.

'Square dinkum she was. And don't you forget it. That's why one of these days I'm going to send you off to Adelaide like I said, and you

can forget all about Alice Springs and Coober Pedy. And Jack Lane,' he had added, his blue eyes squinting at her.

'Never,' said Nicky aloud now, as she got under the shower in her motel room. 'I'll never forget any of it—I'll never want to.'

Guy wasn't going to stop her searching for Cass and Howdie. Somehow, she would find a way to stay in the Centre. Even if he was now her guardian, she wasn't going to let him tell her what she was to do and what she was not to do. She was too old for that, and quite definitely she wasn't going with him on the business trip he was making to the States in a few days' time. He wanted her to come—he had told her, 'Travel will do wonders for you—you'll acquire some poise--'

The telephone in the bedroom rang, and with a slight grimace she draped a towel around herself and went to answer it. It would be Guy to tell her what time the plane left tomorrow or something. As if she couldn't wait till dinner time to hear it! And there was going to be an argument then—an argument that she would have to win.

But after all, it wasn't Guy. It was a long-distance call from Adelaide, and it wasn't even Guy's sister Claudia, with whom she had stayed all the time Jack had been in hospital.

It was Juliet Buchan, who had been her best friend at school.

'Nicky! You're still there, thank goodness. I rang Claudia and she said she expected you back any time, so I was scared stiff I'd be too late.'

'Why? Whatever's happened, Juliet?'

'Oh, Jarry wants me at Coochin Brim-brim. I'm supposed to be flying to Alice Springs tomorrow.' Juliet sounded disgusted. 'Tracy had an accident and she's been evacuated to hospital in Alice, and *I'm* supposed to come and cook and cope with the children and all that.'

All sorts of threats if I refuse—no allowance and off to work in a jam factory or somewhere equally frightful. He *knows* I loathe the Never-never, yet the minute Mother and I come back from Europe *this* happens! Please come with me, Nicky, and give me some support. I just can't face it on my own--'

Nicky's thoughts raced. Of course she wanted to help Juliet, but as well, it was a godsend for her. She had no idea how far from Alice Juliet's half-brother's cattle station was, but at least it was in the Northern Territory, and it would give her some sort of a chance to continue her search for the Johnstons.

'Okay, Juliet,' she agreed quickly, 'of course I'll come. I'll have to explain to Guy--'

'Guy? Oh, this new guardian of yours. Well, he won't mind, will he?'

'He'd better not,' said Nicky gaily.

She told Guy over dinner in the motel restaurant, as they sat at a table for two that was softly lit by a tall pink lamp. Guy was definitely not pleased. He frowned as he listened to her putting her case, then, although she had said she wouldn't have any, he poured her a glass of wine from the bottle he had ordered, and looked across at her frustratedly.

'You do have a will of your own, don't you, Nichola?' He put a hand to his head, ruffling just slightly the well-groomed thickness of his dark corn-coloured hair. 'Well, I suppose I shall have to agree. You've made it very plain you don't want to come to the States with me. Frankly, I'd have thought a taste of world travel, or even a month or so in Adelaide getting yourself culturally clued up, would have been more exciting than holidaying with a school friend. You haven't had time to appreciate your freedom yet, after all.'

Nicky winced slightly at this oblique reference to Jack's death. He had been a long time in hospital, and she had spent a great deal of time with him. Now she was free—that was how Guy saw it.

Both of them were silent while the chicken Guy had ordered was placed before them by the waitress. Glancing about, Nicky saw a big, broad-shouldered man with rather wild dark hair which definitely needed cutting walk in and take a table nearby. For a few seconds her concentration was riveted on him. He looked very much the he-man, despite the obviously top quality navy shirt and dark silk tie he wore with dark trousers. His jaw and upper lip had a blackish look as though he could do with a shave, and as she stared at him he turned his head slightly and looked back at her—openly, and somehow with a deadly accuracy, as if his almost black eyes went straight to the centre of some target. Bang on to her innermost being. She blinked and bit her lip and hastily disengaged her glance from his.

Guy, attacking his dinner, asked her, 'What's the name of this cattle station you say you've been invited to?'

'Coochin Brim-brim,' she said.

'Coochin Brim-brim,' he repeated. 'Then I suppose I must let you go—though you'll hardly learn anything about the civilised world there—or how to cope with your new role of social adult. When I come back from the States, however, I shall be right out to fetch you back where you belong.'

Nicky sighed and nodded automatically, aware that the man at the other table was watching her again from under his heavy straight black eyebrows. He had no manners at all, she decided, and with an effort she contrived to ignore him completely, and didn't even glance his way fleetingly. Deliberately, she kept her voice low while she talked to Guy, who was intent on discussing such practical

considerations as whether she had sufficient funds, and whether her wardrobe was suitable for a holiday on a cattle station.

'I'll make you out a cheque,' he decided. 'You can open a bank account for yourself in town in the morning. As well, you'll need some extra cash to buy yourself jeans, I suppose—shirts—that kind of thing. Walking shoes. Only for God's sake don't become addicted to outback gear. You're feminine, and I like you to look that way ... When is your girl friend arriving?'

'Tomorrow afternoon,' Nicky , said quickly, though actually Juliet had said before she hung up, 'I mightn't make it for another day—Jarry might just have to wait.'

Guy was looking relieved. 'Then you'll have the morning for shopping. I don't like leaving you alone, so see you don't lay yourself open to any trouble—there's plenty of that to be found by a pretty girl on her own even in a place like Alice Springs.'

Nicky wrinkled her nose, and protested mildly, 'Guy, I've been on my own a lot.'

'At boarding school?' he asked wryly.

'During holidays,' she corrected him. He didn't know how she, had spent her holidays with no home, no family to go to. He knew nothing about the swimming schools, the riding schools, the educational coach trips Jack had sent her on. 'I got around quite a bit,' she said mildly. 'And I kept out of mischief, even with no one to tell me how to behave myself.'

He frowned. 'All right, so now someone's concerned for you. Me. It had to happen one day.' The look he sent her was disquieting, and she wished she had said nothing. She thought of Howdie and waited for that warm melting feeling, and knew instead a little cold chill of

doubt. She might have to forget about Howard Johnston; she might never see him again. And even if she did, he might have another girl.

She couldn't finish her chicken. She was suddenly edgy and depressed and dead weary, and that man staring at her from his table was just the last straw.

She didn't go out to the aerodrome with Guy the following morning. She didn't tell him either that Juliet had rung at half-past seven to tell her she wouldn't be in Alice till next day. Guy said goodbye to her in the motel garden, kissed her on the lips, and put his arm around her shoulders while she walked out with him to the cab he'd ordered. The hired car had been returned—'You won't need it,' he'd said. He didn't much like her driving, though she had her driver's licence. She watched the taxi start off, gave a last wave and turned back to the motel, and almost collided with the dark man she had seen the evening before. She murmured an apology and walked past him quickly. He had looked as if he were going to speak to her—to pick her up, now she was on her own, she supposed, as she hurried back to the safety of her own unit. She didn't want to be picked up by a tough-looking man like that. He just didn't appeal to her.

She was wearing a simple yellow sleeveless dress this morning. It was of silk jersey, and with it she wore a macrame belt. Claudia Mallard had helped her shop for clothes in Adelaide when she left school to discover Jack was in hospital, and now in her room she put on a wide-brimmed hat of fine panama, trimmed with yellow ribbon. All very feminine—Guy would be pleased. She looked curiously at herself in the mirror. Nichola Iris Reay, a girl from the city of Adelaide. But her roots were somewhere here, in the Northern Territory, and now she was on her own she had a strange excited feeling that she was going to discover herself.

Not many minutes later she was in Todd Street, ready to begin her shopping. She was aware that Alice Springs had changed

considerably during the six years since she had lived there. Yet it was still decidedly a frontier town, despite the many tourists busy at the travel agencies, booking trips to the Valley of the Eagles, to Kings Canyon and Ayers Rock, and to the Ross River Resort. Cattlemen, miners and all kinds of adventurers still found their way to Alice, and Nicky felt there could be nowhere like it in the whole world, with its tree-lined streets, its rich red backdrop-formed by the MacDonnell Ranges, presently softened here and there by a haze of grey-green vegetation, the legacy of a run of extraordinarily good seasons. Yet despite those good seasons, the River Todd was still no more than a wide dry sandy bed, and Nicky liked it that way. Adelaide was nearly a thousand miles to the south, and the only sealed road—the Bitumen, the Track, as it was called—went north to Darwin, even more distant. In between there was no town anything like the size of Alice with its thirteen or fourteen thousand inhabitants.

Nicky had barely been conscious of these things when she had lived here, but now she was very much aware of them and of the romance of this isolated settlement almost in the very centre of the driest continent in the world.

'Alice, I love you,' she whispered, as she crossed the street in search of jeans and shirts, a cotton hat, a couple of long cotton dresses that would do for evening wear, if ever there was an occasion for dressing up.

Necessities disposed of, her bank account opened, she lunched at Lizzie's "Restaurant, then browsed around some of the aboriginal arts and crafts shops that had sprung up. She bought a long necklace of bush nuts, and a wooden coolamon that she planned to take back to Adelaide for Claudia. The aborigines used coolamons for holding water or seeds, but they would make attractive fruit bowls.

Everywhere she went, she enquired about Cass and Howard Johnston, but no one had heard of them, and in her heart she knew

they must have left Alice. It was deeply disappointing, and she found that the thought of going back to spend hours alone at the motel was not appealing. Instead, she made her way through the heat of the afternoon to the Guth Art Gallery, and it was while she was there that she saw the dark-haired man from the motel again.

She had never been to this art gallery before, and she climbed the spiral staircase to view the extraordinary painted panorama of Central Australian scenes in the octagonal tower. When she descended, she sat down in one of the solid-looking tropical armchairs to rest and to think, her parcels on the red-carpeted floor beside her. This room, from the centre of which the elegant and airy spiral stairway ascended to the tower above, was like a little world apart, quiet and peaceful and cool. Nicky's blue eyes made a lazy dreamy tour of the paintings on the dark-timbered walls. There were Tiffany lamps on tall brass stands, and in the middle of the room near the base of the stairway was a small tiled pool, containing a small sculptured figure and a tiny fountain. She had already spent some time in the adjoining gallery with its aboriginal paintings and its glass cases containing aboriginal objects—kadaitcha shoes, tjur-inga stones, rhythm sticks and bull-roarers, objects made of human hair, and so on. But in this particular small inner gallery where she now sat, she no longer had the feeling of being in the Red Centre—she could have been in some gallery in Adelaide, except that there, more people would have been thronging the gallery.

She had reached this point in her reflections when she was suddenly no longer alone. A tall man in an open-necked black shirt and tight-fitting dark pants had come through the doorway from the other gallery—and Nicky caught her breath. It was that tough, dark-jawed man with the disturbing eyes, and she felt colour flood her cheeks as she glanced quickly away from him and stooped to pick up her parcels, intent on escaping. She was on her feet and ready to beat a retreat when he turned from the painting he had apparently been assessing, and said casually, 'Don't let me drive you away.'

What a cheek! she thought, and she raised her small pointed chin, thankfully feeling her heightened colour subsiding. 'You're not driving me away. I—I have to go, that's all.'

One of his thick level brows rose slightly. He had folded his arms across his chest, and her eyes went to the dark hair springing from the long open V of his shirt, then quickly away again. She felt a curious kind of panic and was annoyed with herself. Surely she was perfectly safe in a public place like this! Yet once again she had the distinct though unreasonable feeling that the way she had stared at him last night had given him the idea that he could pick her up—even that she wanted it.

She took a deep breath and moved across the thick carpeting towards the door. He moved too, as if he were going to block her way. She raised wide frightened hyacinth-blue eyes to his face, and found him looking straight down at her. She felt herself colour again, furiously, deeply, guiltily, simply because of the way he was looking at her.

She knew what it was that disconcerted her now. He looked at her—*sexily*. His eyes were too plainly the eyes of a man looking at a woman, and she was conscious as she had never been conscious before of the shape of her breasts revealed by the clinging silk jersey of her dress. She was conscious too of the pale scattering of freckles across her nose and cheek bones, of the shimmer of her darkly auburn hair washed under the shower last night. Of the vulnerability of her mouth that was warm and trembling. Guy Sonder regarded her as still emerging from the schoolgirl stage, but this man when he looked at her saw nothing of the schoolgirl, she was certain of it. Something in the line of his lips where they met—he had a wide mouth, curving sensuous lips—seemed to tell her that. It was strange how she read it, as clearly as if it had been writing, for she'd certainly never made a study of men, and their attitudes to women.

Her gaze had become fixed on his mouth and on the dark stubble around it that was an indication he was a man who needed to shave twice a day. His chin was deeply cleft--

The curiously mesmerised state into which she had passed was broken abruptly as two more people came into the room, and immediately Nicky moved—stepped quickly past him into that other brighter room from which she could see the dazzle of daylight in the world outside. The pick-up hadn't come off, she told herself.

She went back to the motel immediately, feeling utterly exhausted. In her room, she peeled off her dress, kicked off her sandals, and lay on her back on the bed. With one hand flung protectively across her closed eyes, she curiously experienced that encounter again. It was as if, walking in the jungle, she had seen some proud wild creature staring at her from thick gold-streaked darkness.

It was a mad and fanciful image and she banished it, yet sail some words from Blake's poem drifted maddeningly through her mind—*Tyger, Tyger, burning bright, In the forests of the night--*

Presently she slept a little. After the release from Guy, she told herself, she needed it...

When she got up, she showered and got into a yellow and blue flowered white dress with long sleeves—another of Claudia's selections. It was young, yet subtly elegant, and very flattering to her small waist and rounded hips and bosom. Brushing her hair at the mirror, she thought unwillingly of that—that savage-looking man, and hoped with a slight quickening of her heartbeats that he would not be dining in the motel restaurant—where she had more or less promised Guy that she would dine tonight, with Juliet.

She saw him as soon as she reached the restaurant door. He sat alone at a table for two—the one she had shared with Guy last night—and

she averted her face quickly as she walked forward. Out of the corner of her eye she saw him get to his feet and then to her alarm his hand was on her arm, detaining her. She gave him a cold look of annoyance, intended to make him abandon the idea that she was willing to be picked up, but it didn't get across.

'I'd like you to join me,' he said. His voice was deep yet unexpectedly low and cultured and somehow seductive, and she was momentarily disconcerted.

'I'm not in the least interested,' she managed then, and saw his lip curl a little.

'You might have to be interested—if you're visiting Coochin Brim-brim,' he told her. Her eyes widened and she swallowed nervously, not knowing what it was all about. 'I'm Jarratt Buchan. Does that mean anything to you?'

Nicky's mouth fell slightly open. She couldn't believe her ears. This—this savage-looking man, Juliet's brother? But memory reminded her, hadn't Juliet once confided at school, 'My half-brother is a brute—he's so uncivilised he scares me out of my wits--'

'Sit down,' said Jarratt Buchan softly, obviously amused at her reaction. Wordlessly, Nicky sank into the chair he pulled out for her and looked at him warily through her thick lashes, trying hard to see him as Juliet's brother and failing utterly to do so. Juliet was tallish too, but there the resemblance ended, for she was slim and fair with delicacy written all over her. In the soft light from the pink-shaded table lamp, Jarratt Buchan's dark eyes glowed like devilish coals, and his deeply tanned face was washed over with a red colour. He had shaved, no doubt, but his chin and upper lip and the line of his jaw were as dark as ever. His black hair was combed and shining, yet it didn't lie neatly down against the shape of his head but seemed to have a wild character of its own. He wore a roll-necked shirt of soft

creamy cotton and dark pants. Nicky's eyes fell helplessly to his hands, and the gold gleam of a watch at his wrist, from which dark hair sprang.

'Now let's hear about this visit you're planning to my cattle run,' he said, sitting down opposite her and leaning across the small table. 'Or is it all just a story you made up to rid yourself of your—gentleman friend?'

Nicky stiffened, flushing at his tone. She wondered how much he had heard of her conversation with Guy, and was thankful, to remember that she had lowered her voice. She had half a mind to tell him what she thought of him for listening to other people's private conversations, but obviously that would be a bad start to make when she was going to be a guest at Coochin Brim-brim, so she controlled her natural impulse and tried to hide her annoyance as she said, 'Of course it's not a story. I'm a friend of Juliet's. She must have—she must have forgotten to tell you she'd invited me to come home with her.'

'Home?' he repeated ironically, his eyebrows rising. 'You surprise me! I hardly think Juliet regards Coochin Brim-brim as *home*. But you're right, she certainly forgot to mention you. I had a telegram from her at the hospital this morning, telling me to expect her tomorrow. And that was all. However'—his dark eyes flicked over her in that disconcertingly frank way he had—'you're very welcome. All visitors are welcome at Coochin Brim-brim,' he added, in case, she supposed, she should mistakenly think he meant anything personal. He moved back in his chair and signalled negligently to the waitress, who hurried forward at once. 'Will you have soup, followed by steak and a salad?'

Nicky nodded. It was the easiest thing to do, and while he gave the order, she watched him thoughtfully, trying to marshal her thoughts and accept him as her host-to-be. Somehow it was difficult. Despite

what he had said about her being welcome, she didn't think he was at all eager for her to come along. Well, he would have to put up with her, that was all. She wasn't changing her plans now.

The waitress departed and he took a bread roll from the basket on the table and reached for the butter.

'You haven't told me your name.'

'It's Nicky—Nicky Reay.'

He closed one eye and repeated it slowly. 'Nicky Reay ... and where do you fit into my sister's life? You're a school friend?'

'Yes,' she said briefly.

'Hmm. And at a loose end like Juliet. Well, I hope you aren't misled enough to be expecting to have a riotous time outback.' He shifted his arm on the table to make room for the soup the waitress had brought. 'I suppose you've already heard about my cruelty in tearing my young half-sister from the arms of her would-be lover in France.'

'No,' she retorted, feeling shocked. She took up her soup spoon and added stiffly, 'And—and I don't think you should talk about Juliet's private affairs to—to anyone.'

He smiled lopsidedly. 'Don't worry, I'm not about to go into the details. You'll have the whole story in the next day or two in any case. You're not going to find all that much to entertain you at the homestead.'

Nicky lowered her lashes and began to eat her soup. She was beginning to feel very certain that she wasn't going to like Jarratt Buchan much at all.

He too concentrated on his meal for a few minutes, then pushed his plate aside and asked her abruptly—rudely, she thought—'What brought you to Alice?' He tilted back his dark head and viewed her appraisingly.

For a moment she considered telling him that that was her business, but common sense made her answer casually enough. 'I had some friends to look up.'

'The friend you farewelled this morning didn't look like he belonged in these parts. Who was he?' He asked it outright, bluntly, as if he had a perfect right to question her.

'Guy Sonder,' she said briefly, 'if that means anything to you.'

'Should it? Has he some special call to fame?'

'No.' She didn't know why she felt compelled to enlarge, but she added, 'He's an opal buyer.' One hand moved nervously to push back a strand of hair from her forehead, and his eyes followed the movement, and noted her little opal ring.

'Is that his ring you're wearing?'

She coloured and shook her head, then sat back as the waitress removed their plates and set the steaks and accompanying salads before them.

'He's interested in you, though,' Jarratt Buchan went on, as though there had been no interruption to their conversation. He took up the silver pepper-pot and paused, his eyes on her. 'I mean, as a man is interested in a woman. It's a sexual interest.'

Nicky felt a shock of distaste at his words and knew that her flush had deepened. Guy was interested in her, but that was outside the limits where she was going to allow Jarratt Buchan to probe, and to fox him,

she told him with a slight smile, 'You're guessing, and you're wrong. Guy happens to be my guardian.'

He narrowed his eyes and subjected her to a long brooding look. 'I'm not guessing,' he said flatly. 'As for his being your guardian—it's a classic situation, isn't it? The beautiful young ward and the older man. Does he control your affairs?'

'Till I'm twenty-one,' she admitted. She felt angry with herself for answering his questions, and more angry with him for asking so many, and blinking her blue eyes hard as if to rid herself of the sight of him, she cut into her steak. It was tender and it smelt delicious, yet she had lost her appetite; she felt nervily on edge.

'Or till you marry,' he said musingly after a moment, revealing that he was still thinking about her and Guy. He had guessed right again, but Nicky stayed silent, saying neither yea nor nay. 'How old are you now? Eighteen?'

'Nineteen.' He was wrong this time at least.

'Older than Juliet,' he commented, 'a year behind your age group. Illness? You look healthy enough. Too much social life, I suppose. There's plenty of entertainment to be had in Adelaide if you're not short of cash, isn't there?'

'Is there?' she countered coolly. 'I was a boarder, and I've only just left school.'

'Oh, you've had a few months,' he amended her statement. 'Long enough to make a few experiments. Juliet had no hesitation in France. I shall be interested to see if travel has matured my sister ... I warn you, however, that you'll find life rather different at Coochin Brim-brim—you won't catch up on social life there. We're way out in the Never- never, so far beyond the black stump you'll lose track of the miles.'

'That's not news to me,' Nicky said lightly. She found his conversation bewildering, even disturbing. She had no idea what he would say—or ask—next, or how she would react to it. Of course, she could have told him how she'd spent time since she'd left school—visiting at the hospital—but she didn't feel like offering information when he was so adept at asking questions and imagining he could guess all the answers. His big mistake was in taking for granted that she was just like any other girl at the ladies' college in Adelaide. She quite decidedly—oh, quite decidedly!—was not. As for his cynical warning about the Never-Never, if he only knew she was deeply stirred at the thought of going there. Deep down, she felt her roots begin to stir into new life, into a blossoming that had its beginnings a long way back in her life. Because during the long weeks Jack had been in hospital, he had told her things she had never known before about her own background, about the time before she had gone to the foster-home. She hadn't known till lately that her father had been a crocodile shooter, that her mother's people, the Wests, hadn't sanctioned the marriage, and even now she knew nothing about Nicholas Reay except that he had been a mate of Jack Lane's. So he must have been tough—rough. Guy Sonder knew that too, and he didn't like it at all.

Nicky wished she had been able to ask Jack a lot more things about her past, but he had been a very sick man and most days he hadn't been able to talk at all, he had just been content to have her there with him. But who could tell? Out in the Never-Never, her own hidden memories might surface. Something might come back—she might learn to recognise in herself part of a continuing pattern of life. She might discover what made Nichola Iris Reay the girl she was...

'I wonder,' said Jarratt Buchan into her thoughts, 'what made you decide to go into exile with my young sister?'

She didn't reply immediately. It would have required a multiple answer, part of which might well have been found in the thoughts she

had been entertaining. As well, there was her determination not to let Guy drag her away—her need to continue her search for Cass and Howdie Johnston. But she told him none of those things. She merely said with a little shrug. 'As you remarked—I'm at a loose end. The thought of visiting the outback appeals to me.'

'It does, does it? Then you must have very different tastes from Juliet. It could be because you're more ignorant about this part of the world than she is. Let's hope your enthusiasm will prove robust enough to survive an encounter with reality—a not so brief encounter, if you intend seeing it through with Juliet. I may require her to stay for some considerable time.'

Regardless, she thought, glancing at him quickly and seeing the hardness of his face, of whether or not Juliet was happy.

She said with sudden daring, 'Why should Juliet stay longer than she wants? Suppose she decides she'd like to go home—surely you could find someone else to—to house- keep for you, or whatever it is she's supposed to do.'

He shrugged and shifted the salad bowl so that she could help herself. 'It's time Juliet was given a good long look at where the Buchan fortune comes from. It's not good to go through life doing only what one wants or likes to do. In my opinion, a girl is vulnerable in a number of ways if she doesn't experience a taste of rough handling when she's reasonably young. You girls at your ladies' college—you were protected from all the knocks. Life's been too easy for Juliet, and the fact that her mother never lived at Coochin Brim-brim since before her birth hasn't helped one little bit. Juliet needs a lesson in hardship. Let's put it this way.' He moved the salad bowl slightly, then raised narrowed black eyes to her face. 'Juliet needs to be deprived of her protection—stripped down to her skin—flung into some cold, fast-moving water and forced to swim for her life. To think, in other words. To realise she can't take her comfort, her pampered life, for

granted. If she survives, she won't ever again be all that exacting over what she uses to cover her nakedness—whether it's a Paris model or a bunch of gum leaves. Or even over who sees her skin.'

Nicky looked back at him, wary, puzzled, wondering if he were trying to shock her with his imagery. Yet in his eyes she read nothing but a kind of hard thoughtfulness, and she could have sworn he was not looking out for any kind of reaction on her part. It didn't even occur to him that she might find what he said embarrassing. Guy, now, would never talk to her that way—never! But the thing was that though he was talking specifically of Juliet, she suspected he was implying that she too needed a dose of hard experience.

Her suspicions were confirmed when he went on, 'The trouble is, of course, that someone always comes to the rescue of girls in a predicament, particularly pretty girls like you and Juliet—girls who are well heeled. The best I can do is to insist that Juliet spends a few weeks on my cattle station! Perhaps even you may learn a lesson or two from your visit. I'll guarantee you've rarely, if ever, had to do anything that really went against the grain. Have you?'

She didn't reply, and he ladled out a pile of greens for himself before answering his own question. 'You're in the same boat as my half-sister—pampered, secure, wanting for nothing.'

Secure! Pampered! Nicky thought of the foster-home before Aunty Pat took it over—before Cass and Howdie came. She remembered her feeling of desolation when Jack simply disappeared from her life—she had been five years old, and unable to understand why she had been suddenly abandoned. She never told Jack how deep that wound had gone, or how lonely and unhappy she had been. 'I done it all for you, Rainbow,' he'd told her before he died. 'I quit shooting crocs and took a job as stockman in the centre. You was growing up needing a proper education—kids to play with other than little Abo kids—some sort of future ahead of you other than roughing it. I tried

the opal diggings in Coober Pedy so I could give you the sort of life that should of been yours with a mother like you had.'

It had taken Jack years before he began to make enough money out of opal to take Nicky away from Alice and send her to boarding school in Adelaide. That had been another devastating break, because by then she had come to love Cass and Howdie. But Jack had simply come to Alice and taken her away on the Ghan. And during that long train journey south he had told her, 'Look, Rainbow—you don't have to tell the kids at school anything about Alice or me or where you've been living. See?' She could still see his bright blue eyes looking at her worriedly from his brown leathery face as they rocked down south through the dust and heat.

'What—what do you mean, Jack?' she had faltered. 'I don't *have* to tell them--'

'I jest mean *don't* tell them, Rainbow. Don't go and blab everything out—that's one of the first things an opal miner learns. You don't want to make yourself out to be different, you remember you'll be mixing in with the kind of people your mother was. You'll soon learn their ways.'

She had scarcely seen Jack after that—she had been alone again, starting all over.

Yes, she thought now, there had been many things she had had to do that went against the grain. She didn't know a great deal about being pampered—secure--

She finished her salad and refused dessert and told Jarratt Buchan moderately, 'Actually, I haven't had it all my own way. I've been an orphan since I was very small—about three years old--'

'But a privileged orphan—with a wealthy guardian,' he drawled, leaning his arms on the table and looking quite unimpressed. 'Will you have coffee? A liqueur?'

She didn't contradict what he had said. He thought he knew it all, so who was she to argue?

'Just coffee, thank you,' she told him politely. She hadn't yet developed a taste for liqueurs—though Jarratt Buchan probably thought she'd been brought up on them. It would have been nice, she thought irritably, if he'd expressed some sympathy when she'd told him she was an orphan, instead of simply qualifying her statement. Though on second thoughts, she supposed sympathy at this stage was a little late. And besides, he thought she'd immediately acquired a wealthy guardian. If he only knew!

CHAPTER TWO

THE coffees came, plus one Drambuie, and Jarratt Buchan asked abruptly, 'Well, Nichola, who were your parents, anyhow?' His eyes, as he stirred sugar into his coffee, skimmed her face, her bosom, all that could be seen of her above the table edge, in fact, in a way that made her stiffen.

'Are you checking that I'm a suitable guest to come to Coochin Brim-brim?' she asked dryly. The name tripped easily off her tongue, like some strain of familiar music. Yet it had never sounded that way at school, when Juliet used to talk about the place—and her older half-brother—disparagingly, Nicky thought. She became aware that what she had said displeased him as he leaned forward and looked smoulderingly into her blue eyes.

'Look here, Nichola Reay—whether your father was a dustman or a doctor or a deep-sea diver, or a lord or a louse or a lunatic—it would make no difference to your coming as a guest to my cattle station. You would still be welcome ... but knowing something about your parents, your background, just might make a little bit of difference to my understanding of you.'

She flinched at his tone, and bit her Up before she said shortly, 'I don't know much about my parents. But my mother—my mother was Iris West from Kooriekirra cattle station, if you've ever heard of it. Still, I don't see how it will help you to understand me better, because both my parents have been dead for about sixteen years and I don't remember them—not one single thing about them.'

He sat back in his chair and she blinked hard and sipped her coffee. Jarratt Buchan sipped his liqueur and continued to stare at her, but not angrily or smoulderingly any longer. Then he remarked conversationally, 'So you have connections with Kooriekirra. Do you

know what the name means, by any chance?' She shook her head, interested despite herself. 'No.'

'It's an aboriginal word meaning the rainbow. Iris—your mother's name—that's the rainbow too, as you probably know from Greek mythology. Iris was the goddess of the rainbow—the messenger of Juno, the queen of the gods.'

Nicky hadn't known, but wasn't going to admit to it. She was a little surprised that this tough-looking man knew anything about Greek mythology, however, and what he had said made her widen her eyes, because it was like a little bright revelation. It was like looking through a slit in a high wall and seeing for a fleeting instant into a secret and forgotten garden. A tantalising glimpse. Her maternal grandparents, of whom she knew nothing except that they had rejected her father, had called their cattle station after the rainbow, and they had linked their daughter's name to it too. And it was why her mother had called *her* Rainbow--She felt a little ache in her heart for all that was past and lost, for all that she would never know.

She said on a faint sigh, 'My second name is Iris too. But I never went to Kooriekirra.'

Jarratt Buchan's dark eyes narrowed and he stared at the tiny amount of liquid still left in his glass.

'You'd scarcely have been old enough to remember it if you had,' he commented.

'What do you mean?' she asked quickly.

'Well, I've never been on Kooriekirra either—it's up towards the Top End. And I never knew the Wests, but I do know they went broke—they had to get out during the long drought that must have already been in progress when you were born.'

'Where are they—now?' She almost whispered it, her lips pale.

'Nobody told you?' he said curiously.

She shook her head.

'Both your grandparents were killed in a freak accident as they left the place. There was an electric storm and as they drove across the dry river bed, an old river red gum was split in two by lightning and fell on the car.'

Nicky reached for her coffee. Her hand was shaking. It was weird to hear such things about your grandparents from someone who was a perfect stranger and yet knew more than you did. She wondered whether perhaps, if they had lived, her grandparents would have looked after her—and she would never have been left in Jack Lane's rough, if well-meaning, hands. But that was something she would never know.

He asked, looking at her hard, 'Your mother was an only child, wasn't she?'

She nodded. Jack had told her that.

'Still, it's a wonder no one told you about the Wests.' He frowned darkly. 'This—Guy Sonder—surely can't always have been your guardian? He's not all that old.'

'No,' she agreed. 'A—a friend of my parents looked after me before.'

She waited for him to ask who it was, who her father had been, because this whole conversation had started that way, and he had said quite specifically that knowing about her parents would help his understanding of her. But he didn't ask, and when he spoke it was to say dryly, 'Well, you haven't done too badly, have you? And these friends you were looking up in Alice—who were they?'

'Nobody you'd know,' she said quickly. And that was funny, because later she was proved quite wrong about that. She added, 'You ask a lot of questions, don't you, Mr Buchan?'

'If you want to know something, you ask,' he said dismissively. 'But if your friends are to remain a secret for some reason, then forget it. But tell me this—are you and Juliet cooking up something between you?'

She wrinkled her smooth forehead. 'Such as what?'

'I wouldn't know. But I do know Juliet was throwing tantrums over my request that she should come out to the Centre. If the two of you have worked out some scheme, you might as well tell me now.'

Nicky laughed. 'Do you really think if we did have a—a scheme, I'd tell you?'

He didn't answer immediately. He first explored her face anew with those disturbing, disconcerting black eyes. Then he told her lazily, 'If you're waving the banner of schoolgirl loyalty in my face, you may as well forget it. Everything about you tells me you're not young enough—not naive enough—for that kind of thinking. So yes, I do think you'd tell me—with a little pressing.'

'Don't bother with it, because I wouldn't,' she said, bright colour flaring in her cheeks. She pushed back her chair. 'Please excuse me now--'

'I'm ready to go too,' he said. She moved quickly from the table, but almost instantly felt his fingers under her elbow, and a strange tremor ran up her arm. They reached the foyer from which a door led to the motel garden, and it was towards this door he was guiding her.

'I'm going to bed now, Mr Jarratt,' she told him, resisting the pressure of his fingers.

'Unwise immediately after dinner,' he said, unmoved. 'A little exercise will help you sleep better.'

'I don't want a little exercise—I had plenty today.'

'Then you can breathe in some fresh air and look for shooting stars.'

She resisted a moment longer, remembering, perhaps ridiculously, Guy's warning, 'See you don't lay yourself open to any trouble.' Yet as Jarratt Buchan, still gripping her by the elbow, led her into the garden, she had the feeling she could be putting herself in a spot. She was uncomfortably aware that this man, although he certainly didn't have a high opinion of her, regarded her as a woman. No man before had ever given her that intense awareness of her own sex, and it was a sensation she had not yet learned to deal with.

There was no one else in the garden. The swimming pool glinted, the stars were just as bright as she always remembered them being in Alice, and, most disturbing of all, she realised she was going to spend the next week, two weeks, or who knew how long? as a guest on this man's cattle station. She didn't know quite what she thought of him, but she found him decidedly over-positive, and she knew Juliet was at least a little afraid of him. Right now she was frightened of him too. She had the feeling that he was going to kiss her, and she had no idea how to cope. Guy had kissed her several times, firmly yet gently, as if he were afraid to disturb her roots—as if she were a seed that had been planted and had only just begun to grow. She didn't think Jarratt Buchan would kiss that way...

But after all she was not to find out yet, as they stood together in the garden in the caressing warmth of the darkness, both of them staring upward.

'A falling star!' Nicky exclaimed.

'The eye of Thuwatha, the Rainbow Serpent,' he murmured. Then almost abruptly he released her. 'You'd better get in and have your sleep after all. We've a long drive ahead of us tomorrow.'

It was not till she was in her motel unit with the door safely locked that she thought, 'I should have asked about Tracy.' But she had forgotten.

Once she was in bed, she lay awake for a long time, her eyes fixed on the high window against which the shadows of the orange trees outside moved gently. Tomorrow, Juliet would arrive on the plane. Tomorrow the three of them, Juliet, Jarratt, herself, would be on their way to Coochin Brim-brim away out in the Never-Never. What hope would she have out there of ever finding Howdie Johnston? She didn't know, and yet she felt almost madly excited. It was as if something unknown were beckoning her on.

Jarratt Buchan didn't offer to take Nicky out to the airport with him the following morning, to meet Juliet.

'I can't give you the exact time we'll be leaving for Coochin Brim-brim,' he told her. He had come to her suite while she was still having breakfast. 'I shall take Juliet straight to the hospital to visit her sister, and I'll pick you up here later, some time before lunch. See that you're ready, won't you?' He glanced at her scattered belongings—jeans, shirts, yesterday's purchases, not yet packed—and the quizzical look on his face annoyed her intensely. At least she was dressed, and it wouldn't take her more than five minutes to pack up. 'Don't flit off to do more shopping—if you're short of country gear you can get some-thing from the station store. Make sure you're wearing something suitable for driving through the dust, by the way—I don't have an air-conditioner in my car, and that pretty little thing you're wearing now won't look so fresh and nice after a few

hours of dirt roads. We leave the bitumen just past the Red Lily petrol station—though of course that doesn't mean anything to you, does it?"

It did, but she didn't say so. She merely shrugged and buttered another piece of toast in a leisurely way. 'I'll be ready, Mr Buchan.'

He gave a quick frown. 'For God's sake—my name's Jarratt, and that's the name you'll use. Till later, then.' He turned abruptly and was gone.

Nicky finished her breakfast and did her packing. Deliberately, she kept on the 'pretty little thing' he had referred to so scathingly. It was a sleeveless ivory-coloured cotton with pale blue binding at the neck and armholes, and a short sleeved matching jacket. It was cool and comfortable, and it washed easily and dried in a flash, so ...

She left her luggage at the office, and decided to make one more effort to trace Cass and Howard. This time she went to the post office, and rather wondered why she hadn't thought of doing so before, particularly when, to her complete amazement, the man behind the counter told her promptly, 'Yeah, there's a Catherine Johnston out on one of the cattle stations.'

Nicky's heart beats quickened. 'Which cattle station is it, please? She's a friend of mine--'

'Coochin Brim-brim—that's four hundred, maybe four- fifty kilometres from Alice.'

Nicky could hardly believe her ears! It was fantastically impossible! What on earth could Cass be doing at Coochin Brim-brim?

'And Howard—Howard Johnston?' she asked.

The man shook his head. 'Sorry, miss. Can't recollect any mail going through for him.'

Nicky thanked him and stepped out into the sunny street feeling curious and elated and excited all at the same time. It seemed quite extraordinary that Cass should be at Coochin Brim-brim. It was as if Fate had meant her to find the Johnstons. Walking back along Todd Street, she thought about Howdie; soon she would at least learn where he was and what he was doing, and whether there was a girl in his life. Suddenly she couldn't wait to be there, to see Cass again, to talk over all that had happened since last they met. Mixed in with her excitement was a little fear that they might have grown apart, be constrained with each other. Nicky had gone away from the foster-home to such a different life—the Johnstons might resent it. It was a disturbing thought.

She made her way slowly back to the motel, loitering on the way to look in shop windows, yet seeing nothing because she felt quite sick with apprehension. Even the sight of her reflection in a shop window bothered her. Did she look too different from the rather untidy child who had lived at Aunty Pat's and giggled with Cass, and made toffee in the kitchen or played french cricket with the children in the garden? Would Cass feel estranged? Would Howdie, if she should ever meet him again? Yet wasn't she the same girl—exactly the same girl—inside? Outwardly she *was* different. She had been playing a part ever since she had gone to Adelaide, and Jack had always provided money for suitable clothes when she went away on excursions during the school holidays. She always had the right things to wear for riding or swimming or skiing, or simply travelling. One of the teachers used to be deputised to take her shopping and no expense had been spared, though Claudia Mallard, supervising the purchase of a post- school wardrobe, had deplored the lack of flair. Actually Nicky was looking forward to wearing jeans and shirts—the clothes Guy had said he hoped she wouldn't become addicted to. And she rather wished she had changed into them before she packed. Perhaps it wasn't too late now—she didn't really want Cass to see her looking like a city girl.

But when she reached the motel Juliet was already there, waiting in the garden beyond the office.

The two girls greeted each other enthusiastically.

'It's great to see you, Nicky,' Juliet exclaimed, and Nicky asked as they sat down in the shade, 'Where's Jarratt? I hope he's not looking for me—I didn't think you'd be here so early, and I don't want to be in trouble.'

Juliet grinned. 'It hasn't taken you long to catch on! Everyone's in trouble with Jarry unless they do exactly as he orders. But right now, he's gone to get the mail.'

Looking at her, Nicky thought she was thinner than she had been at school, and her grey-green eyes looked larger. Her long pale blonde hair floated down her back, giving her a fragile air. She wore a white hand-embroidered blouse with tiny sleeves, and a green skirt and sandals, apparel that was no more suited to an outback journey than was Nicky's dress. Nicky asked, 'How's your sister?'

'Oh, poor Tracy is really sick. That's why we didn't stay long at the hospital. The Sister said it was better to let her sleep. She was thrown by her horse, and she has broken ribs and pretty bad concussion and a lot of bruises. They had to get the ambulance out to Coochin to fly her in. I just can't think why she was riding at all—she doesn't like outback life any more than I do, with the hideous heat and dust and no one around except a lot of rough men.' She turned to smile at Nicky. 'Jarry said you and he met at the motel yesterday and had dinner together last night. You must know already how bossy he is. He just gets his own way about everything, no matter how—yet he talks about me being spoiled! He's like some atrocious he-man from the old pioneering days, isn't he? In looks, I mean.'

Nicky thought of Jarratt's dark brooding eyes, of the blackness of his jaw, of his dark-springy-looking hair, and she remembered with an inward tremor the feeling those eyes had given her of being a woman, a woman in danger--

'He's not a bit like you, Juliet,' she admitted. 'But we shan't see all that much of him, shall we? Won't he be out working most of the time?'

Juliet shrugged. 'I don't really know. Coochin Brim-brim is a place I avoid visiting all I can—a couple of weeks now and again during school vacations has been more than enough for me. I only ever came when I absolutely couldn't get out of it. All I know about Jarry is that he likes to order everyone around. I'm positive he could have managed without dragging me out here now, but he says I've been frittering away my time ever since I left school, and I can come to Coochin and learn what makes it all possible.' She tossed back her blonde hair frowningly. 'And wait till you hear how he interfered with my—my private life, in France! My mother's just so weak—she tells him everything that happens. She's afraid she'll be cut off without a penny or something if she doesn't—Jarry's been the head of the family ever since he was about twenty, when Father died, and left everything in his hands without reservation. Except the house in Adelaide—that's my mother's—and she does have a small personal income apart from what she gets from the cattle station.'

She jumped up suddenly. 'Here's Jarry now. We'd better go out to the car before he shouts for us.'

Nicky followed her towards the car that had pulled up outside the motel, then with a murmured explanation went into the office for her luggage. She reflected that for all her talk, Juliet evidently obeyed her brother, and probably held him in just as much awe as her mother did. She discovered that Jarratt had come to help her with her suitcase and handed it over to him.

'So you didn't change,' he remarked, his eyes flickering over her dress disparagingly. 'You're not going to impress anyone in that when you step out of the car at the end of the day.'

'I didn't think there was anyone to try to impress out in the Never-Never—except you,' Nicky retorted. 'And you wouldn't be impressed anyway.'

'I'm not going to take that up,' he said sardonically, 'not yet.' He gave her a half smile and a look from his dark eyes that made her wish she had held her tongue.

The two girls were relegated to the back seat in the station wagon—'That way, you can whisper to each other without dislocating your necks,' Jarratt said, 'and I shan't be bothered with your nattering.'

The arrangement suited Nicky very well, but actually she and Juliet scarcely talked at all, and she rather suspected that Juliet's pose of apathy and boredom was intended to impress on her brother the sacrifice she was making in coming here at all. It was a bad situation when you had left school, Nicky reflected, to have to comply with disagreeable orders simply to make sure of being- given your usual bread and butter. How would she herself react, she wondered; if Guy should try to push her into something against her will—if he should say, 'Right! Your allowance is withheld unless you do as I say.' She had nearly two years to wait before she turned twenty-one, though certainly she did have the little box of opals Jack had left her. Guy had said they were worth a packet, but he hadn't put a figure on the packet, and he hadn't offered to buy them from her.

'I wouldn't sell them,' Nicky thought, gazing out at the spinifex and the thick stands of mulga as they sped along the Stuart Highway, 'I'd get a job—take up nursing.' She might do that in any case, because she wasn't interested in living a useless social life, but while she was

at school her main ambition had been, quite simply, to *belong* to someone. She had fully intended going to Coober Pedy to look after Jack in his dug-out home, although she knew he was dead set against it. It was 'no life for Iris West's daughter!' As well, she had wanted to find Howdie again; and perhaps marry him, she admitted to herself now.

And that brought her thoughts back to Cass.

She glanced at Juliet, whose eyes were closed and whose long lashes lay against the pallor of her skin. She did look washed out, and no wonder, for the heat was increasing as the day wore on and as they travelled north. At least on the bitumen they weren't bothered by dust, except occasionally when Jarratt had to pull the station wagon on to the red verge to let a cattle train pass, as he did now. He had tuned in the car radio to a programme of light music, and when the dust had subsided, Nicky looked out once more at the countryside. A few red termite mounds were dotted about among the desert oaks and mulgas, and low scrub, yellow-flowered, made a patch of colour against the rich red of the earth. To Nicky's eyes it looked utterly beautiful, and she was sorry that Juliet couldn't enjoy it as she was doing. There had been a succession of good seasons in the Centre, and the flamboyant reds and purples of the landscape were softened by unusually luxuriant plant life. When she had come this way with Guy two days ago she had been too preoccupied to feel thrilled, but now her blood pulsed with excitement and with a warm and deep love for this desert land in which soon she and Cass were to meet again.

By the time they reached the Red Lily Store, looking infinitely isolated at the side of the narrow highway, Nicky was feeling ravenous. Not so Juliet, who was really feeling the heat now, as the dew of perspiration on her forehead and upper lip showed. As Jarratt pulled up she opened her grey-green eyes, looked with dislike at the store and the petrol station, and said emphatically, 'Don't ask me if I'm hungry! I couldn't eat a thing—and decidedly not the stuff they'd

serve up in that little dump. All I want is a cold, cold drink, but I don't suppose such a thing is available in this boiling hot place.'

Jarratt turned his back and walked off in the middle of her speech, and Nicky said sympathetically, 'Poor Juliet! But you'll get a cold drink—and there's a shady place to sit too, next to the store. Are you coming?'

Juliet didn't answer her smile. 'There'll be flies—besides which, I don't feel like putting up with my brother and his bloody-mindedness. I'll get out and stretch my legs presently, but I would appreciate it if you'd bring me a can of something cold.'

Nicky frowned. She wasn't all that keen on coping with Jarratt alone, and it wasn't really very fair of Juliet to be so sulky. She suggested reasonably, 'Can't you cheer up a bit and forget your grievances? After all, Tracy is in hospital, and someone has to take her place.'

'Someone doesn't,' Juliet retorted. 'There's a girl to mind the children, and there's Lena who's been practically running the homestead for years and years. Jarry's just throwing his weight around.'

Nicky shrugged resignedly. 'All right, I'm sorry. I'll see what I can get for you.'

Jarratt was already sitting in the outdoor eating place with its shady roof, but before joining him she went into the store where a woman, presumably Mrs Capper, served her and she was able to buy a carton of frozen orange juice which she took back to Juliet. She joined Jarratt at his table just as the little blonde she had spoken to the other day appeared with the lunch he had already ordered, the thonged sandals she was wearing flip-flopping as she crossed the beaten earth.

'I'm afraid it's not up to Adelaide fare,' Jarratt told Nicky dryly as she took the chair he pulled out for her.

'Now, fair go!' the little blonde girl protested cheerfully. 'If there's one thing I *can* make, it's a salad—and this is a super one.' She unloaded from her tray a large bowl of tropical salad and a platter of pink ham decorated with sprigs of crisp-looking parsley. Another bowl held bread rolls, and there was a small slab of butter.

'Did you get in touch with your friends?' she asked Nicky when everything had been set out on the table.

Nicky nodded. 'I'm right on their trail, thank you.'

'That's great.' The girl glanced at Jarratt. 'Tea?'

He nodded and she disappeared. He asked Nicky negligently, 'Whose trail are you on?'

More questions! This time she couldn't say, 'Nobody you'd know,' but she told him casually, 'Oh, just some people I knew in Alice.' She knew she had to resist or he would drag all her private life out of her. She helped herself to salad and buttered one of the rolls, then asked him a question.

'Don't you care whether Juliet has any lunch or not?'

'Why should I care? It's entirely up to her, isn't it? *I'm* hungry—and I can see you're hungry. But if Juliet isn't hungry, I'm not going to insist she should eat. I'm not quite such a bully as all that... Where did you get to this morning, by the way? I told you to be ready.'

'I was ready when you were. I didn't keep you waiting. It just happened I had some business to do in town, that's all.'

He didn't look as if he believed her. 'Did you get it done satisfactorily?'

'Yes, thank you.' She changed the subject. 'Juliet says her sister had a bad accident.'

'Bad—but not all that bad,' he conceded. 'It could have been a great deal worse.'

'I thought she didn't like riding--'

'You thought?' His brows rose. 'What would you know about it? You mean Juliet told you. I hope she didn't also suggest I might have cracked my whip and forced Tracy into the saddle.' Her eyes fell before his and she felt a fool—and disliked him for making her feel one. 'Tracy makes her own decisions,' he continued. 'Sometimes they're wrong ones, like thinking she could handle Smoke. And like marrying, at eighteen, a man she scarcely knew—against my advice. When her marriage fell to pieces, she came to seek refuge at Coochin Brim-brim. Did Juliet tell you that?'

'No,' Nicky said. She hadn't even known that Tracy's marriage had broken up. She asked lamely. 'How many children are there?'

'Two girls, Marcie.-Ann and Medora. Bright as buttons and a lot noisier.'

'Who's looking after them?' The moment she asked, she knew the answer. Cass—of course! Cass had always liked children—she had wanted to be a teacher.

'A girl called Catherine Johnston,' Jarratt was saying. 'A '. try competent, very charming girl.'

Nicky wasn't sure why she didn't say at once, 'I know her,' but she didn't. And then she reasoned with herself it would mean too many explanations—confessions, even—on her part. Telling him things about herself that even Juliet didn't know. So she took another roll and said casually, She's young, of course.'

'About your age. A country girl, who's used to the outback.'

Nicky had a ridiculous and almost uncontrollable impulse to ask, 'Is she pretty?', because Cass had been pretty. A little bit plump, with long straight light brown hair, a wide mouth and a habit of smiling with a sort of expectant innocence in her shining hazel eyes. She didn't ask, of course, and Jarratt elaborated of his own accord, 'The kids are safe with her. She has a load of good honest common sense.'

She hadn't always had a lot of *that*. She had been a dreamer, a romantic. Nicky remembered her saying once, with a faraway look in her eyes, 'If I could have three wishes—you know what they'd be, Nicky? I'd wish to have blue eyes, like yours. And to fly—all by myself, you know, so everyone would look up and see me and stare, and marvel. And the third wish—I haven't quite finished making that up yet. Something about love and getting married, though.'

'Oh, heavens,' Nicky thought now, 'it will be good to see Cass again!'

She asked Jarratt, 'We'll be leaving the bitumen soon, won't we?'

'Very shortly,' he agreed, his dark eyes glinting. 'Are you looking forward to it?'

She was, as a matter of fact, dust and bumps and all, but he wouldn't believe her if she said so.

'Should I be?' she asked with raised eyebrows. He answered her with a crooked smile and she reflected that his teeth were excellent—and that he didn't smile often enough for the fact to be appreciated. Not at her, at any rate...

The little Capper girl reappeared with cups and a pot of tea and the query, 'Anything else you'd like?'

'I think we're right for nourishment, thanks, Shirley. How's your father today? Is his back still bad?'

'Yes, it's really crook. He's all twisted up.' She stood with her arms folded and her feet apart. She was wearing shorts and she had no qualms about showing her rather chunky, muscly legs. Her blonde hair was tied back at each side of her face, and she wore no make-up at all, and she was enjoying talking to Jarratt Buchan. Nicky reached for the teapot and poured two cups of tea.

'What we need at this place,' Shirley said, 'is another man. Able-bodied. But we can't run to it. I'm pretty competent and I can manage the petrol and all that, but we do need a man.'

Nicky was watching her as she spoke, and she suddenly saw that it was only her smallness that made her appear so young. She was probably eighteen or so. She glanced at Jarratt and he was looking at Shirley too—exactly the way he had looked at Nicky. He was looking at a woman, and Shirley was enjoying it.

'Oh, blow!' she exclaimed. 'There's someone wanting petrol. See you!' She raised her hand and flitted off.

'Bright girl, that,' said Jarratt. 'Not afraid of a bit of hard work, either.' He picked up his cup and drank his tea down without drawing breath. The thought entered Nicky's head, '*She* doesn't need to be thrown in the creek. That treatment's strictly for girl's like Juliet and me!'

'Something's amusing you,' the man opposite her remarked. 'I won't ask you what it is. That's a very private little smile .you're wearing.'

'Is it?' Nicky felt colour come into her cheeks. 'I'm surprised you aren't asking. You generally do, don't you? Ask questions, I mean.'

He was pouring himself another cup of tea. 'When they're relevant. In this case they're not. And as I said, your thoughts looked very private.'

Her flush deepened. What on earth did he imagine went on in her head? She said carelessly, 'They weren't private, as a matter of fact. I was just thinking that Shirley Capper and Cass—Catherine Johnston are apparently two girls you wouldn't like to throw in the creek.'

'What the devil are you talking about?' he asked, pausing with his cup halfway to his lips.

'Juliet and me. Didn't you have ideas of grabbing our clothes and making us swim for it? There was some lesson girls like us have to learn--'

'Oh, I see.' He smiled very faintly, his dark eyes regarding her broodingly from over his cup, and she felt again that strange sensation spreading out from her being, down her spine and along her limbs, and she stared back at him for a long moment before flicking down her lashes defensively.

'Well,' he said matter-of-facdy, 'if you've finished you can go back to the car and I'll get hold of some ice creams. That way, Juliet won't starve to death.'

They were on their way again very soon after that and after about ten or fifteen minutes they turned off the bitumen on to a red road, and the uncomfortable part of the journey had begun. It was some time since the road had been graded and as well the dust was bad.

'This isn't my idea of fun,' Juliet muttered, then raising her voice asked her brother why he didn't have a plane. 'Then I wouldn't have to endure this specific form of torture.'

'When I marry will be time enough for an expense of that kind,' he told her, and Juliet said, 'I hope it will be soon.' After that, she relapsed into silence and Nicky became absorbed in the scenery and in her own thoughts. She noticed that the termite mounds here were bigger, and some of them, she thought fancifully, looked like

sculptured figures of Buddha. The land was low and swelling, sometimes open and parklike, with mulga trees standing deep in the pale spiky spinifex grass that from the car had a deceptively plushy look. Galahs and green and yellow shell parrots flew up from the sides of the road in hundreds, and now and then there were cattle to be seen among the trees.

Juliet had closed her eyes to it all once more, but Nicky watched and dreamed, half stunned by the heat, and seeing everything through the dust that curled up and floated about them like red smoke as the car rolled on. In the front seat Jarratt Buchan concentrated on driving, or perhaps he was listening to the radio or thinking about his cattle. At all events, he didn't make any effort to converse. The road was a purplish red and sharp black shadows from low trees lay across it as stark as splashes of paint. The thought came to Nicky that she had lived in country like this before, perhaps in those two years when Jack had worked as a stockman after her parents had died. She didn't remember a thing about those years, except perhaps—perhaps little black children and red sand--

Nicky opened her eyes and discovered she had been asleep and dreaming, and the afternoon had nearly gone. Lovely desert grevilleas, golden-flowered, dark-branched, floated on the pale sea of the spinifex and all along the roadside there were wild hops in flower. She exclaimed impulsively, seeing Juliet had her eyes open at last, 'It's beaut-looking country, isn't it, Juliet? All those marvellous reds, and the yellow flowers.'

Juliet shrugged. 'It doesn't do a single thing for me.'

Jarratt switched the radio off and said distinctly, 'You have a closed mind, Juliet. It's a pity your mother decided to live in Adelaide. If you'd spent more of your childhood here you'd have had a sense of belonging.'

'It's too late for that,' said Juliet pettishly.

'Well, don't think your moaning and moping and mooning about are going to persuade me to send you back to Adelaide. You're unemployed and unemployable as far as the big world is concerned, but you can make yourself useful in Coochin Brim-brim, with Tracy in hospital. It's high time you learned something about the cattle station that pays for your comfort—and that was for many years your father's home.' He paused and Nicky saw his dark eyes glaring at Juliet in the rear-vision mirror.

'You should have lived in Victorian times, Jarry,' Juliet said. 'Then you could have pushed the womenfolk around all you liked without them uttering a sound. Though you do your best now, don't you? First Tracy, now me. You'll be smarting on Nicky next.'

Jarratt ignored that and merely remarked, 'You can enjoy yourself at Coochin if you give your mind to it.'

'So could the pig enjoy the pepper,' Juliet retorted, and Nicky couldn't help laughing—which drew Jarratt's attention to her.

He asked suddenly as the car bounced through flying red dust on a particularly rough stretch of road, 'What have *you* been doing since you left school, Nichola?—while my young sister's been in France falling violently in love with someone else's fiance?'

'I've been watching my guardian die,' said Nicky, and as soon as she'd spoken wished she had kept quiet.

'Oh, my God--' she heard him mutter. Then, 'I apologise.'

'It's all right,' she said evenly. 'I didn't ever get to know him terribly well—it was something I'd hoped to do when school was over.'

'I'm sorry about that,' he said sombrely. 'You really could have told me about it before—you had the opportunity. It might help in future if you dispensed with at least a little of your reticence. We're going to be fairly closely associated with each other during the next few weeks, and communication's important when you five in the outback.'

Nicky edged into the corner of the seat so she wouldn't have to meet his eyes in the rear-vision mirror. Reticence was part of her nature, and she was by no means ready to confide in Jarratt Buchan. She felt, for some reason, more wary of him than she had ever felt of anyone in her life. It was on her conscience at this minute that she hadn't told him she knew Catherine Johnston, but she wasn't going to confess to that now. She would work it out with Cass later—after all, how did she know what Cass had chosen to tell her employer about her past? She and Cass had always understood each other anyhow. They had been united by their solitariness, their uncertainty as to whether or not the world wanted them.

She sighed a little and glanced at her watch.

'How long before we reach the homestead—Jarratt?' His name didn't come easily to her lips, but she forced herself to say it.

'We shan't arrive till dark. This road doesn't lend itself to high speeds, and I don't want to shake you girls out of your skins.'

'We're already covered in dust,' Juliet complained. 'I hope we can get a hot shower when we arrive. Or shall I have to put on Lena's apron and stoke up the stove and cook dinner? Because I warn you, I can't cook.'

'I'm aware of that, but at least you'll have a chance to learn while you're here. Lena will have cooked dinner tonight, and you can take your turn tomorrow. As well, you can start getting yourself clued up on a few of the things you should have learned to do at home.'

'When you're studying, you don't have a lot of time,' Juliet retorted.

'That would sound more convincing if you'd distinguished yourself scholastically,' he answered dryly.

'Everyone can't be intellectual. I was good at Art and French, anyhow.'

'Oh, French, of course! And what were your pet subjects, Nichola?'

'I coped with most of them,' Nicky said, flushing, 'I was very mediocre. Why do you ask?' she said daringly.

'You rouse my curiosity,' he said sardonically.

It was practically dark when at last, after crossing several cattle grids, they came in sight of the station buildings. The homestead lay not far from the bank of a long waterhole, and away beyond it, across a plain where spinifex showed palely and isolated trees made dark shadows, there was a line of low fiat-topped hills against the horizon. An empty world. The car headlights flashed over the white limbs of a beautiful ghost gum, then dipped as they crossed the wide sandy bed of a creek. River red gums lined the bank, but they were left behind as the car continued on towards the homestead, half hidden in its garden and sheltered by tall trees. Further ahead were cottages and a few lights, but there was not a soul to be seen as Jarratt pulled up at the end of the homestead drive.

Nicky, full of an inner excitement, looked expectantly towards the long low house with its grey roof as she climbed, somewhat stiff-limbed, from the car in Juliet's wake.

CHAPTER THREE

'WITH Tracy in hospital we have to do without a reception committee,' Jarratt remarked. He took some of the luggage and went ahead into the house while the girls followed.

It was an old house, Nicky noted, with a comfortable air of blending in with its surroundings. The floors were of polished wood, and there was a long carpet runner down the hall through which Jarratt escorted them.

'You can use these two rooms. Quite possibly there's only one bed made up, I couldn't be sure, but there are plenty of sheets in the linen closet.' He set down their suitcases and added, 'I'll get the rest of your gear after I've let Lena know we're three and not two. Don't take more than fifteen minutes, will you?'

Nicky and Juliet looked inside the bedrooms, switching on the lights to do so. Both rooms were airy and spacious, with doors opening on to the verandah. One room was predominantly green, the other blue, and while the furnishings were tasteful and adequate they were far from sumptuous.

Juliet grimaced. 'Which cell will you have, Nicky?'

'Oh, Juliet, they're hardly cells! With some flowers and a few pictures on the walls and—and one's personal possessions about, they'd be lovely rooms ... I'll have the blue one, if that's all right with you.'

'Perfectly.' Juliet slid her suitcase across the polished floor. 'If we only have fifteen minutes, we'll have to make do with a wash till after dinner, I suppose.' She looked at herself in the mirror. 'I look as big a mess as you—we're both dressed in pink!' She giggled a little and Nicky felt relieved that she was cheering up. 'I'll see you later in the dining room. The bathroom's just along the hall, by the way.'

In her blue room, Nicky stripped off her dusty dress and ran her fingers through her hair, reflecting that it could certainly do with a wash. She was standing in her bra and half-slip looking round for a bath towel when someone knocked on the half closed door, and Jarratt's dark-jawed face appeared.

'Here's the rest of your luggage,' he said, his eyes flicking over her half-clad body quite openly. She looked back at him feeling as if she were naked, then moved quickly away from the mirror, turning her back on him. He had no manners, she thought—he could have begged her pardon and disappeared instead of standing staring at her.

She stammered out, 'I—I don't think I have a towel. And do you make a habit of coming into guests' bedrooms while they're undressing?'

'I haven't thought about it,' he said, and she could imagine the mockery in his eyes. 'But you're pretty well covered. Besides which, I thought it was the city girls who had the broad minds and liberated ideas. Haven't you caught up with that set yet?'

'No, I haven't,' she said coldly. 'Could I please have a towel?'

'That's something Juliet should have seen to,' he commented.

He disappeared to her relief, and she had slipped into her dressing gown when a hand holding a large blue bath towel appeared round the door and Jarratt's voice said. 'Here we are, Miss Nichola Reay. Is this what you want?'

'Thank you.' Nicky moved across to take it. She pulled the door open and walked past him, and he said after her, 'The bathroom's on your left.'

It was a big disappointment not to find Cass in the dining room when, much refreshed, but still conscious of her dulled dusty hair, she went in to dinner. Juliet hadn't yet put in an appearance, but Jarratt, his jaw

shaved, his hair damp, rose from the table until she was seated, and almost immediately Lena came in with a large casserole dish which she placed on a mat in front of Jarratt. She was a plump, cheerful-looking aboriginal woman with a round dark face and bright eyes, and she wore a short-sleeved blue cotton overall.

'This is Lena, Nicky,' Jarratt said. 'Lena—Nicky's a friend of Juliet's.'

'Hello, Nicky,' Lena said with a wide smile that showed her white teeth. Nicky smiled back at her. Sometimes, at the foster-home in Alice, there had been aboriginal children, and she felt she had been used to them all her life. Lena disappeared, and Jarratt took the lid off the casserole.

'If you'd come out earlier, I'd have offered you a gin or a sherry or whatever your favourite tipple is,' he told Nicky.

'That's all right, I don't have a favourite tipple.'

'No? I'm sure Juliet's become addicted to some exotic aperitif since her sojourn in France ... Are you going to have some beef and vegetables?'

'Yes, please.'

He proceeded to serve her a portion, remarking that they wouldn't wait for Juliet, who was quite likely to have no appetite anyhow. They were sitting before two steaming plates of food when Juliet joined them, saying predictably, 'Just give me a very small amount, Jarry. I'm not hungry—it's too hot.'

They ate in silence, all of them tired, Nicky supposed. It wasn't a very tasty meal—Lena was certainly no cook—but Nicky ate out of politeness and because she was hungry. 'Where are the children?' she asked presently. 'And—and Catherine?'

Juliet stared. 'Who on earth's Catherine? Is she the girl who looks after the children?'

'She is,' Jarratt said. 'But as from tomorrow you'll be doing your share of that. The children are sleeping in Catherine's bungalow tonight, Lena tells me, so she can keep an eye on them while she does her study.'

'What study?' Juliet asked the question that was on Nicky's lips too.

'Catherine's sitting for her final school examination at the end of the year. She didn't finish her schooling and she wants to train to be a teacher. So she studies. So you will help with the children,' he finished.

Juliet didn't look at all pleased. 'That's the *weirdest thing* I ever heard! You mean I've been summoned all this way just so the—the nursemaid or governess or whatever she is can *study*, instead of doing what she's paid to do?'

Jarratt's frown was forbidding. 'That's quite enough, Juliet. You're here for your own good.'

'I'm here for *Catherine's* good,' Juliet cried with hostility in her grey-green eyes. 'Now I know why you insisted I should come back from France with Mother--'

'Now calm down, Juliet. You know that's not true. Tracy hadn't fallen off her horse at that stage, so just don't get carried away by your sense of injustice.'

'It *is* unjust,' Juliet insisted unrepentantly. 'You've got Lena to cook for you'—she made a face, showing plainly her opinion of Lena's cooking—'there's someone here whose special job it is to look after the children—and now, as well as me, poor Nicky's been dragged into it.'

Jarratt looked both exasperated and amused. He turned his dark eyes on Nicky. Very much aware of it, she tried not to look back, but to go on eating her dinner. But for some reason or other she finally had to meet his gaze, and they exchanged a long and searching glance, during which her cheeks flushed slowly to a deep crimson. She hoped Juliet didn't notice, and was pretty sure she didn't because she was now angrily buttering a slice of home-baked bread.

Finally Jarratt said softly, 'If you feel you've been dragged into something, you're quite free to go—Nicky.' She flinched at the soft drawling way he said her name, giving it an entirely new sound. 'Actually, I had the idea it suited you to come here, though it didn't appear to suit your— guardian, in Alice Springs.'

'It—it suited us both,' she stammered, not knowing what he was getting at. 'And I don't feel I've been dragged into anything, Juliet.'

'Well, you have,' Juliet insisted. 'We're obviously going to have a couple of little kids on our hands all the time.'

'You're exaggerating,' Jarratt said with restraint. 'Why don't you try, for a change, to think of this as your home—a home where you naturally share in the activities and theduties? Catherine won't thrust her charges on you unduly, I assure you. She's a most conscientious and agreeable girl.'

And a charming one too, Nicky remembered, while Juliet muttered rebelliously, 'She'd better be!'

None of them lingered, at the table once Lena had brought in the tea. Jarratt rose, excused himself and disappeared, and Juliet said she would have a shower and go to bed.

'I know I should offer you first go, Nicky, but I'm so dead tired! Arguing with Jarry just wears me down—as well as the heat. I shan't be long, I promise.'

'Don't hurry on my account,' Nicky said with a smile. She reflected that all the arguing had made her tired too, and she hadn't even seen Cass! She wondered if she should go to the kitchen and help Lena with the dishes, but she thought she could hear Jarratt's voice coming from that direction. After a moment she went to her room, where she discovered on turning back the quilt that her bed was made up. She took her pyjamas from her suitcase, switched on the reading light and stood in the middle of the room feeling restless and uncertain. Across the verandah and beyond the garden, she could see lights shining. Cass's bungalow must be over there, and suddenly she knew she couldn't wait any longer.

She went through to the verandah, ran down the steps and across the dark garden. There was no moon yet, but the stars were bright, and for a few seconds she stood staring upwards. Outside the garden she moved along the track and into the trees amid shadows that were suddenly dark and confusing. She no longer felt sure that she would find Cass here—these bungalows might belong to the men. A dog began to bark, and her heart thudded. The sensible thing to have done would have been to ask Jarratt where Cass's bungalow was—to tell him they knew each other, and now it was too late.

Ahead of her, she saw a man come on to the verandah of one of the bungalows. He wore nothing but a pair of trousers, and she stood stock still, feeling herself an intruder. When he called out in a pleasant educated voice,

'Who's there?' she didn't answer. She waited till he had gone inside again and then, feeling defeated, she turned back towards the homestead.

She had almost reached the verandah, and her nostrils were filled with the sweet and indefinable scents of the night, when she saw Jarratt Buchan at the top of the steps. 'Damn,' she thought. 'More questions!'

'Don't tell me we have a night owl on our hands,' he remarked as she came up the steps.

'What do you mean?' She paused and looked up at him, her breath a little uneven, though she felt relieved he hadn't shot out the question she had been expecting—'Where have you been?'

'Do you only begin to come alive around nine o'clock at night?' he elucidated.

'No. But you told me last night one should take a walk after dinner. You can't have it both ways.'

'You have me there,' he said with a grin. 'Who did you see?'

'No one,' she said promptly. 'Not even the man in the moon.'

'Heaven help me! Am I going to have two defiant creatures on my hands? I mistakenly imagined that you at least were a little mature.'

'I'm sorry,' Nicky said with a sigh, 'it's just that your questions bother me. I'm just not used to anyone taking such an—interest, in what I do—what I think.'

'Pity,' he said.

She began to move past him, murmuring, 'Goodnight.'

'Sleep well,' he said. 'Do you want to come out with me in the morning?'

The question came as a surprise, and she answered quickly, thinking of Cass, 'I'd rather just poke around, thank you.'

He shrugged and smiled wryly, and she saw that she had fallen into a trap. 'Go ahead then. It's more or less what I expected of a friend of Juliet's.'

She sighed inwardly and didn't protest that she wouldn't want to 'poke round' every day—that, in fact, she would like to go out with him some time and see what went on on a big cattle station. He probably wouldn't ask her again.

Looking up at him, she felt him uncomfortably close. In imagination she could see the expression in his eyes very | clearly—and she reminded herself that it had been there, too, when he had looked at Shirley Capper.

'Goodnight,' she said again, and this time she got past him.

Cass was there in the morning. 'The boss' had gone out ' in the utility, Lena told Nicky cheerfully, and Juliet was still in bed—"having her brekfus on a tray'. But on the end of one of the side verandahs, two small girls and Cass sat at ; breakfast at a table covered by a bright green and white checked cloth.

'Nicky!'

Cass got up from her place at the table unsteadily, staring as if she couldn't believe her eyes.

'Lena said someone called Nicky had come with Juliet—] but I didn't imagine even for an instant that it would be you. Oh—I can't believe it! How did it happen? Did you know I was here? Sit down and tell me everything.'

Nicky took a chair and laughed and sipped her glass of orange juice, and then the two of them looked at each other for half a minute without saying a word.

Cass, Nicky thought, was reassuringly the same—yet different. Still a tiny bit plump, still with long straight brown hair, still with the same clear honest hazel eyes, and wide wistful mouth. But she looked older than Nicky had expected, and there was a sort of maturity about her, even dressed as she was in blue jeans and orange and blue checked shirt. Nicky's shirt and jeans were brand new and looked it, and she felt self-conscious about them and wondered what impression Cass was gaining. She glanced at the two little girls who were staring at her, their faces sticky with toast and jam.

'You haven't met the children,' Cass said. 'This is Marcie-Ann, who is six and is a pupil at the School of the Air. And this is Medora, with the curly hair. Tell Nicky how old you are, pet.'

'Free! And I can count! One, two, three--'

'Later, darling,' Cass interrupted with a loving smile—exactly the smile she used to give the small children in the fosterhome—and how they had adored her, Nicky remembered! 'If you've had enough to eat, you can both go and play in the yard while Nicky and I drink our coffee.' They scrambled off their chairs and made for the steps, and she called after them, 'Now mind—don't go out of the garden!'

When they had gone, Nicky asked, 'Cass, where's How-die?'

'Out at the muster. Oh, won't he be excited when he finds you're here! You're going to stay awhile, aren't you?' Cass asked anxiously.

Nicky could hardly answer. Howard was out at the muster!—here on Coochin Brim-brim!

'Cass, you can't mean Howdie's here—right here—on this very cattle station! It's like a dream—I just can't believe it.'

'Neither can I,' Cass agreed. 'To think we've met up again after all these years! I never thought I'd see you again after that rich old relative of yours came and spirited you away.'

'He wasn't a rich old relative. He was my guardian,' Nicky started to explain.

Cass interrupted, 'Your hair's gone dark—it's darker than mine.'

'That's since I had it cut short.'

Cass's hazel eyes were on her, curious yet loving. 'I always wanted blue eyes like yours. Do you remember?'

Nicky nodded. 'And you wanted to fly--'

'I've become reconciled to having neither of those wishes come true. And Nicky, do you remember the fairytale Aunty Pat used to tell us about the two vain princesses whose plaits were braided together by a wicked fairy, so neither of them could get free to go to the king's feast and meet the handsome prince? You always said you'd let someone cut off your hair so I could go, if it were you and I--'

'And you said the same,' laughed Nicky. 'And do you remember the little glass Cinderella slipper you got out of a Christmas cracker--'

'I still wear it round my neck.' Cass fished down the neck of her shirt and produced it.

'Oh, all the things there are to remember!' Nicky exclaimed. 'When will Howdie be back? I just can't wait to see him!'

'I've no idea. They only went out three days ago. It will be weeks—this is a huge place. You'd have to ask Jarry, though.'

'Jarry? Do you call him that?'

'Why not? He expects me to.' Cass coloured faintly. 'Isn't he the most generous, friendly man you ever met, Nicky? He's been absolutely wonderful to me and How- die—and we looked such tramps when we turned up here, asking for work.'

Nicky didn't answer directly. She certainly hadn't seen Jarratt Buchan in that particular light, she saw him more through Juliet's eyes, perhaps, and she was inclined to think Cass must be just as romantic as ever she had been.

Cass got up and began to stack up the dishes. 'I have about half an hour before the School of the Air session. Shall we go into the garden and talk? Or do you want to wait around for Juliet?'

Nicky pushed back her chair. She hadn't yet told the Buchans that she already knew Cass, but she brushed that thought aside as something to be dealt with later, and soon she and Cass were sitting under the pepper trees while the children built castles out of a heap of river sand.

'You've probably had an exciting time since last we met,' Cass said, 'different from us. And you look kind of—elegant.'

Nicky frowned, not sure that she liked this. 'I haven't had an exciting time really. It was mostly school. And Jack—my guardian—died last month in hospital.'

'Oh, Nicky, I *am* sorry. Then you're all on your own again.'

'In a way. Except I have a new guardian now, mostly to—to administer the money Jack left me.'

Cass listened wide-eyed. 'I suppose you're quite rich and could do anything you liked—go to Europe, see all those old castles and cathedrals and historic places.'

'I'd have to get Guy's permission first—and he probably wouldn't give it,' said Nicky lightly, feeling embarrassed. 'Anyhow, I'd far sooner be here with you and Howard.'

'You were sort of in love with Howdie, weren't you?' Cass said. 'I know he thought you were wonderful—he's hardly looked at another girl since you went, either. I used to make up stories with happy endings—you and Howdie would be married and I'd find someone too—and now it's all beginning to come true.'

Nicky laughed a little. Cass's imagination had always been inclined to run away with her strangely enough, for in many ways she was a very practical girl, perhaps because she had had to be. At least she never let circumstances get her down—she had always made the best of things.

'Anyhow,' Cass went on, laughing too, 'go on about school and all that. Was it fun? Did you have marvellous holidays—with—with Jack?'

'I hardly saw him at all. I used to be sent away to riding school, things like that. I was lonely, Cass. I missed you and Howdie. I used to cry myself to sleep some nights, the girls at boarding school were—well, so different from me. I wrote to you, but you didn't answer.'

'I never got your letter,' said Cass, appalled. 'We were shifted about a lot after you went. Aunty Pat left and there were new cottage parents, real mean ones. We weren't allowed in the sitting room to watch TV—and we couldn't make pikelets or toffee in the kitchen like you and I used to do. After a while we were moved to another home and—well, it wasn't bad, but Howdie got fed up and decided we'd clear out, and so we did.'

'You didn't finish school?'

'I couldn't! I'd have had to stay on by myself, and I wanted to stick to Howdie. He bought an old motor-bike with the money he'd earned

doing odd jobs around the town after school, and we went bush. We got jobs all over the place—mostly on cattle stations. Howdie did fencing or tank building or digging dams or serving petrol—anything at all.'

'And what did you do, Cass?' Nicky asked, aware of how different from theirs her life had been. No wonder Jarratt thought she and Juliet were soft!

'Oh, I cooked—minded kids—did sewing or mending. It was hard sometimes, but we got along. Now it's different. We've been really lucky. Jarry Buchan said he'd give us both a chance when we turned up here early in the year. He was so *kind*. He asked a lot of questions--'

'He's certainly good at that,' Nicky agreed, and Cass gave her a puzzled look.

'Oh well, he had a right to ask questions. I mean, you don't take two strangers practically into your home without finding out something about them. Not that we told him everything, Howdie said we didn't want to make it sound like a sob story. Anyhow, Jarry gave him a job as a stockman, and he said I could help Tracy with the children. I don't think she's terribly strong,' she explained naively, 'and she feels the heat. As well, he said it would be a good idea for me to do correspondence lessons and sit for exams at the end of the year. I've been really happy here. The only thing I wish is that Howdie could work up to being independent. That's what he wants most of all, and we've been saving every cent we can. So that's us,' she said with a smile, then leaned over and picked up Nicky's left hand. 'You're not engaged, are you, Nicky?'

'No.'

Cass frowned thoughtfully. 'You liked Howard a lot, didn't you? But I suppose things are different now. I mean, we still have nothing, and you're friends with people like the Puchans.'

'It doesn't make any difference,' Nicky protested. 'How can you imagine it would, Cass—ever?'

Cass shrugged and glanced back at the house. 'I haven't met Juliet yet. I thought it best to keep out of the way last night? though if I'd known you were coming, I'd have been waiting on the verandah!'

'I looked for you,' Nicky confessed. 'I went to some buildings along the track, where there were lights, and a man with no shirt on came on to the verandah and called out, and I was scared.'

'Oh, Nicky, that was only Lewis Trent. He teaches the aboriginal children on the property, and he helped me with my lessons while Jarry was away. You'll like him.'

There was a slight pause, then Nicky said, 'I didn't tell the Buchans I knew you, Cass. You probably won't understand, but—I've never said anything to Juliet about living in Alice or the foster-home and all that part of my life. Jack told me I wasn't to talk, that I had to make a new start and forget the past. I couldn't do that, of course, but I didn't talk, and now explanations are going to be pretty complicated.'

'Why make them, then?' Cass asked sensibly. 'Don't think you have to do so on my account. It's nobody's business but our own whether we met here or somewhere else. Not that it would matter if the whole story came out, if Juliet's anything like Jarry. He'd take it all for granted. He judges people on what they are themselves.'

And what he doesn't know he guesses, and often guesses wrongly, thought Nicky wryly. 'If it comes up,' she decided aloud, 'I'll talk about it. But not otherwise.'

'Agreed,' said Cass with a smile.

Cass and Juliet met later in the morning. To Nicky's discomfiture, Juliet was offhand and not very friendly, probably because she considered Catherine was partly to blame for the fact that she had been 'dragged' out to Coochin Brim-brim. Cass devoted herself to the children all the morning, and after lunch—for which Jarry did not come home—they were sent to have a rest. Usually Cass then got on with her study, but today she introduced Nicky and Juliet to Lewis Trent, the schoolteacher. He was a brown-faced, brown-eyed young man in his late twenties, good-looking, mature and quiet. He was going off somewhere in a rather battered-looking car, and he didn't invite anyone to come with him.

As the three girls went back to the house in the hot sun, Juliet remarked caustically, 'He's not exactly sociable, is he? You'd think he'd have asked me and "Nicky if we'd like to go for a drive. Where's he off to, anyhow?'

'Probably to talk to some of the aborigines,' Cass said. 'Or he might be going down to the cool of the creek bank to work. He only has school in the mornings, and he's writing a thesis for his doctorate. It's about the aborigines. He's made a study of them, in the Kimberleys and in Darwin, and now here, on a cattle station.'

'He sounds as if he'd be an intellectual bore,' Juliet said unkindly. 'It's just as well he didn't ask us to go along with him. I don't want to talk to the blacks.'

Cass said nothing and neither did Nicky.

That afternoon, while Cass studied—'The place is a hive of industry, isn't it?' Juliet commented sarcastically—the other two girls decided to take a swim in the waterhole. They were about to set out when Lena appeared to tell them with a cheerful smile that showed her big

white teeth, 'Jarry says you going to cook tonight, Juliet. He doesn't go much on my cooking and Tracy—sometimes she's not much better. Those girls, Noreen and Daisy—they'll peel the veg'ables. Catherine and Lewis, they'll have dinner here too.'

'I see,' said Juliet faintly. It was all she did say until she and Nicky were out of earshot, and then she burst out explosively, 'Did you ever hear anything like that? What on earth are we going to do? I haven't the remotest idea how to cook dinner for—five people. Jarry's mad! He knows perfectly well I've never done any cooking in my life.' She flipped at the flies with her towel, her fair face flushed with annoyance.

'Don't worry, Juliet,' Nicky soothed. 'We'll manage. I can 'cook a bit. Claudia Mallard taught me when I stayed with her in Adelaide this year. All we need do is get back from our swim in time to see what there is in the fridge.'

'If there is a fridge,' said Juliet—though she knew very well there was.

They had their swim. The waterhole was pleasant and shady, with river red gums ranked along its sides, but all the same Juliet's nose got sunburned and Nicky's freckles multiplied.

When they got back, Lena had already lit the oven, and Nicky prepared the roast of beef, seasoning it with mustard and brown sugar in the way Claudia had taught her, before putting it in the oven. Cass was already giving the children their meal on the verandah, and Daisy and Noreen were peeling potatoes and cutting up pumpkin. There were fresh beans that didn't need stringing, too, from the vegetable garden. Dessert? Nicky found some cream that had gone sour, and a tin of cherries. She soaked the cherries in a little brandy, then later added the cream, and that was it.

Juliet lounged around the kitchen helplessly, protesting, 'I'm not sure I should let you do this, Nicky. It might teach Jarry a lesson if there just wasn't any dinner. Only,' she added thoughtfully, 'I don't want to start a row and be made to look a fool in front of the nursemaid and the schoolteacher, whatever his name is.'

'Lewis Trent,' Nicky supplied, putting the dessert in the huge refrigerator and reflecting that she was acting as if this were *her* home rather than Juliet's. 'Didn't you think he looked rather nice? He must be clever too, from what Catherine said.'

'Then Catherine's welcome to him,' Juliet said indifferently. 'Anyone who *chooses* to work out here is past my comprehension.'

When Jarry came home, Nicky was alone on the verandah. Cass was putting the children to bed and Juliet had gone to her room to change for dinner. 'Not for anyone's benefit but my own, and because I like to change for dinner,' she assured Nicky. Nicky had carried a jug of fresh orange and lemon juice through to the verandah and was sitting in one of the big armchairs of fine split rattan, sipping her drink and cooling down after the heat of the kitchen. Tomorrow morning, she decided, she was going to take a look at the garden, and maybe do a spot of weeding and watering. Daisy and Noreen did sweeping and dusting and washing, but she didn't think anyone attended to the garden. Probably when Tracy was here she did that. She wondered, as she gazed out across the garden that was softly hazed with the light of sunset, how long it would be before the muster was over, and whether there was any chance of her getting out to it to see Howard. If she had known earlier that he was working here, she would have given Jarry a different answer last night when he had asked her if she wanted to come out with him.

The wire screen door banged, and Jarry came on to the verandah. He saw her immediately and came towards her, looking the complete

husky outback male in dark shirt and narrow-legged drill trousers that emphasised his lean hips.

'Well, how did the poking round work out, Nicky?' The cultured voice was at such odds with his roughness, his unshavenness, that she was almost shocked. His dark eyes roved over her sardonically, as she sat sipping her drink, and she had no doubt he saw her as the spoiled and protected girl keeping well clear of all the harsher aspects of a remote cattle station.

'It worked out very well, thank you,' she said coolly, though she felt far from cool under his scrutiny. She moved nervously, reaching out to put her glass on the cane table. 'Juliet and I got around to meeting Lewis Trent—and of course Catherine. And this afternoon we went for a swim.'

'I guessed as much,' he said with a grin. He had poured himself a drink, and he lounged, big and masculine, on the tropical couch, his legs stretched out in front of him, his dusty boots in evidence. 'How are you enjoying the birds and the bush and the quiet?'

'They're fine,' she said.

'And the sun? You appear to have acquired a few more freckles.'

'Do I?' She wished she could control the quick colour that came into her cheeks. 'Well, that doesn't matter, and anyhow, the sun doesn't bother me.'

'Take care you respect it, all the same. It has a power that's not to be taken lightly.'

'Ob, I know—dehydrated travellers and all that,' she said flippantly.

He frowned at her tone and asked abruptly, 'Where's Juliet? Because I'm damned sure she's not in the kitchen.'

'Not now. But she has been.' Nicky assured him, her eyes glinting with malicious triumph.

'She has? Then God help us all.' He got up. 'I suppose I must make myself civilised, seeing I'm to dine with three beautiful girls.'

The quality of the dinner surprised him. He complimented Juliet, but asked no awkward questions, and Juliet accepted his praise blandly, with an offhand, 'Oh well, Nicky and I got together--'

Afterwards, when Lewis had gone to his bungalow and Cass had gone to fetch her books so that Jarratt could explain some mathematical problem that had been bothering her, Jarrett asked his sister, 'Did you manage that dinner all with the aid of a cookbook? There must be more power than I thought in the written word—or else I've been underestimating your abilities. You'll make some man a good wife after all.'

'Not if you have your way,' said Juliet smartly. 'Making me come home from France.'

'You're only eighteen yet,' he pointed out. 'And if your French boy-friend is seriously interested in you—and manages to disentangle himself from his other engagement—he'll come out to Australia for you.'

Cass came in then, and he transferred his attention to her.

It was the first of several similar evenings, except that soon, although Jarratt didn't know it, Juliet scarcely came into the kitchen at all. She had discovered a box containing all sorts of scraps of dress and furnishing material, and had decided she'd like to make a fabric collage. Art had been one of her good subjects at school, and as she had made paper collages, why not experiment with fabric? It could be quite intriguing!

'You don't mind if I don't help, do you?' she asked Nicky apologetically. 'I know I do nothing but get in the way and fuss you, and I'm not in the mood to apply myself to learning to cook when it's all for the benefit of Jarry and the nursemaid and Lewis Trent. The incentive just isn't there. Jarry needs a wife, and I'm going to tell him so. He can't expect Tracy to stay here for ever, it wouldn't be fair, and he needn't think I'm going to run to the rescue if he doesn't like Lena's cooking. We'll have to watch out he doesn't discover *you're* the cook, Nicky, or he'll try to strongarm you into staying. Would you?'

She laughed as she said it, but Nicky was disconcerted.

'Would I—what?' she asked, tasting the cucumber soup she had concocted in the morning, and that had been chilling in the refrigerator all day. She hardly thought the time would ever come when Jarratt Buchan would try to strong-arm her into staying on his cattle station, whether she could cook or not.

'Stay—marry him,' Juliet said.

'You must be joking,' Nicky retorted.

'I am,' said Juliet with a giggle.

A few nights later Jarratt, coming home earlier than usual, caught Nicky red-handed in the kitchen, busily preparing a special sauce to go with the roast chicken they were having as a change from beef.

She looked up for no particular reason to see him leaning against the doorway, his dark brows tilted quizzically.

'Well, well—it looks like the end of the fiction, doesn't it? Where did you learn to cook?'

'Me?' she said flusteredly. 'What do you mean? We—Juliet and I—work things out together—she's--'

'Liar,' he said. 'Juliet's so wrapped up in sticking bits of velvet and lace on to a sugar bag she doesn't even know it's getting on for dinner time—or that I'm home. So where and when did you acquire your skill? Because you're not bad, you know.'

Praise, she thought wryly, for the one and only thing she had been discovered able to do. She said resignedly, 'Oh well, my guardian's sister taught me a few tricks.' She wasn't going to tell him she had discovered she had quite a flair for cooking when she had been given a free hand now and again at the foster-home, when she was about twelve years old.

'Which guardian was that?' he asked. 'The one you were with in Alice?'

Her colour rose. She knew what he was thinking. He had decided that Guy was 'interested' in her—and had seen to it that she learned to cook. And the fact was, there was more than a grain of truth in that.

'Yes, that one,' she said after a moment.

'Hmm. You keep a lot of secrets, don't you, Nicky Reay?' he said enigmatically. She had no idea if he was referring to the fact that Juliet didn't do the cooking, or if he meant she kept secrets about herself—and she certainly did that.

'I try to,' she said wryly, 'and one of them's the way to make this sauce. So would you please go away and let me get on with it?'

'Certainly,' he agreed. 'I'll see you later. We'll have to drink a toast to the cook, I think.'

There was wine on the table for the first time that night—a delectable white from the Barossa Valley, to complement the chicken, and though there was no formal toast drunk, Jarratt lifted his glass and smiled at Nicky before he drank. Her eyes fell before his, yet she felt

a little warm glow that was certainly not due to the wine. The glow made her think of Howard. Jarratt had never asked her to come out with him since that first night, and now she supposed he never would. If she wanted to see Howard, she would have to suggest it herself, and somehow she shrank from doing so. The alternative was to wait till the end of the muster, and that, according to Cass, could be weeks off.

Perhaps, she thought, as he was in a good mood tonight, she might ask him after dinner—provided she could get him to herself for a moment. But that proved not to be easy. When she came in from the kitchen with the coffee, Cass had fetched her books and was perched on the arm of Jarratt's chair, leaning over his shoulder while he read some essay she had written.

Juliet took her coffee out to the verandah, and Nicky followed her.

'That *girl*,' Juliet said impatiently. 'She does hang around Jarry, doesn't she? Every night it's the same. As if he'd be interested in a nursemaid! It's painfully plain she has her eye on him—all this study business is just a scheme to monopolise his attention.'

Only a moment ago, Nicky had been impatient with Cass for taking up Jarry's time, but now she was up in arms on her behalf and retorted without thinking, 'Of course it's not a scheme! She has to pass her exams—she wants to be a teacher.'

'So she says.' Juliet was cynical. 'But I don't believe it. If that was all she was interested in, then I'm sure Lewis Trent would be more help to her than Jarry.'

'Lewis has work of his own to get through.' Nicky had a brief battle with herself and decided the time had come to be honest. She had suffered on and off from a feeling of guilt for days now, and finally she said firmly, 'I happen to know Cass does want to be a

schoolteacher, Juliet, because—because I knew her years ago in Alice Springs—and it was her ambition then.'

Juliet was staring at her in utter amazement.

'You knew Catherine Johnston! But how—extraordinary! Why on earth didn't you say so before? Or didn't you remember her at first? I didn't know you'd even been to Alice Springs before this year.'

'I used to live there,' Nicky explained with a sigh. She leaned on the verandah rail and looked out into the starry night. 'Cass and I went to school together.'

'Good—heavens!' Juliet seemed unable to get over it. Then she said, 'Well, I suppose there aren't any private schools in Alice ... And I haven't changed my ideas, no matter what you say. She's got her sights fixed on my brother. Wouldn't you say it promised a brighter future to marry him than to launch herself into a dreary teaching career? Not that she has a chance, if she had the sense to realise it. Despite his tough all-men-are-equal act, Jarry just wouldn't marry beneath him. Not ever.'

Nicky's mouth opened on a soundless exclamation. 'Marry beneath him!' What a thing to say in this **day** and age! **And** there was nothing wrong with Cass, she would fit in anywhere with a little practice. For all Juliet knew, Cass's father could have been a cattleman who'd been ruined by drought—her background could be brilliant. It was absurd how shallow her judgments were. Nicky, for instance, was okay because they'd gone to the school and because her guardian had been cashed up. But just suppose she had ever met Jack, who had been a mate of Nicky's father when they were both shooting crocodiles up in the Top End. Jarratt had nothing on Jack when it came to being tough. And Jack had had no finesse, no social manners, no soft cultured voice. He'd had ambitions and a heart of gold where Nicky was concerned, even if he hadn't understood the emotional needs of a

growing girl. Heavens, if Juliet had met Jack, she'd think Nicky was beneath her.

Nicky felt quite sick. She was a fraud. She had deliberately told Jarratt that her mother had been a West from Kooriekirra—that had sounded great, and she had let it sound that way by withholding the rest of her background from him. The strange thing was that he hadn't followed up and persisted in having her tell him something about her father. He had said earlier, 'Whether your father's a lord or a louse or a lunatic you will still be welcome as a guest on my cattle station'.

As a guest—or as a nursemaid, she thought now. But when it came to marriage, that would be a different kettle of fish. Juliet had said so. Not that that aspect of it interested her—or Cass.

She turned abruptly from the verandah rail. 'I'm going to bed.'

'Oh, not yet,' Juliet protested. 'Let's go in and break up the party. Jarry should put himself out to entertain us sometimes. He has a whole pile of records in there, and I'd like to hear some music, anyhow. If it disturbs the nursemaid's homework, she can jolly well bundle up her books and take them over to her bungalow. Though I bet she'll hang around and listen too. You just see.'

Nicky followed her inside unwillingly. She was still in a false position, yet she couldn't see that it would do any good to come out with the whole truth. It would, in fact, merely create an awkward situation. Rather naively, she had never suspected this streak of snobbishness in Juliet. She was aware of it in Guy and Claudia, but it was disconcerting to find a school friend with similar narrow views. Jack had known what he was talking about after all when he had advised her to keep her mouth shut at school. She'd probably have found herself without friends. He'd probably have told her not to blab it all out here, too ...

But she wasn't going to desert Cass, who had been her friend once and always would be so.

All the same, she was relieved to discover Cass already in the process of packing up her books.

'I'll go and work on that idea,' she was telling Jarry. 'Thanks for putting it into my head.' She gave him one of her wide trustful smiles, said goodnight to Nicky and Juliet and was gone.

So Juliet had her music, but Nicky, though she sat and pretended to listen, found herself thinking constantly instead about her own doubtful position. What on earth was Juliet going to think when she discovered that Nicky was in love with the 'nursemaid's' brother—a stockman?

In some ways, it was perhaps as well that Howdie wasn't around...

CHAPTER FOUR

NEXT afternoon, while Juliet was 'sticking velvet and lace on a sugarbag', as Jarratt had put it, though he knew very well she was creating a fabric picture, and Cass was poring over her books, Nicky took a ride. There were plenty of horses available, and the cowboy, Billy, suggested she should take Sandover Lily, a rather handsome grey.

It was great to get away from the homestead and the thoughts that had begun to oppress her, and she relaxed completely as her horse cantered over the gently undulating land, through the scattered mulga scrub with its undercover of rose and straw-coloured grasses. Galahs and black cockatoos flew out of the trees, the sky was hazed with heat, the shadows were indigo, and the low flat-topped distant ranges were pale violet shadows floating on a horizon that wavered and shimmered like water.

Nicky loved it, and yet she didn't know why. This country seemed to stir memories that she couldn't yet grasp, memories that spoke of happiness. It was as if long ago she had crossed just this creek bed, so wide and sandy and dry, and, moving into the feathery shade of the desert oaks on the far side, had seen the bright flowers of the yellowtops spread their gold across the vermillion earth. Had seen, too, this little witchetty bush standing tiptoe in the red sand, its roots exposed, its leaves soft blue grey, its golden flowers dancing, a confident little Port Lincoln parrot strutting about underneath.

She rode for a long time and when she took Sandover Lily back to the horse paddock, she didn't go back to the homestead. Feeling a need to be alone a little while longer, she wandered down past the white-painted schoolhouse, the machinery shed and the garages, and there under some trees, she saw three little aboriginal children playing in the red sand. They were very young—they wouldn't

qualify yet for school with Lewis Trent—and she stood where she was, motionless in the tree shade, watching them.

Afterwards, she had no idea at all what game they had been playing, of whether or not she heard their voices, because there grew in her mind a kind of vision, or memory, that became inextricably confused with what she saw. Shadows flickered on her face and in her eyes, the hot sun warmed her as she stood dreaming...

Long ago *she* had squatted on the ground like this, chattering and sifting the clean red sand through her small fingers. She and those little dark children had dug out fat, creamy grubs from the roots of witchetty bushes, and she could see the small round black faces tilted up, small fingers holding a plump witchetty grub by the head. She had a strong sensation of, herself, biting off the body—the nutty taste, the texture—she remembered it all. And she could picture herself, her little freckled face, her red-gold hair, her childish blue eyes wide as she looked at the tasty morsel and opened her mouth to bite. And then, as she savoured the delicious mouthful, a man looked down at her from an immense height, his eyes fixed on her.

She frowned slightly, turning her head. Had it been Jack watching her? Were they his eyes that had scrutinised her?

Nicky blinked. Right now, she was looking into a man's eyes, but they weren't blue, like Jack's, they were black and—oh God!—they had the most devastating effect on her. They pulled her right out of her dream and smash- bang back into her own adult body. They belonged of course, to Jarratt Buchan, and just now there was something very sexy about them. She drew a deep and almost painful breath, glanced guiltily at the children still absorbed, in their game, and moved away from the tree against which she was leaning. Wishing she could as easily move away from those watchful eyes.

'What's taken your fancy?' His voice was very soft. 'Are you having sentimental thoughts about little black children?'

She shook her head. 'I was—half asleep. I've been out riding all afternoon.'

'So you ride, do you?'

'With a short stirrup,' she agreed, deriding herself. 'I learned at riding school.'

'Where else?' he murmured.

Without either of them having said anything further, they began to move under the trees away from the children, until they were quite alone. Nicky felt dizzy. She didn't know why—whether she had ridden too far in the sun or whether it was something to do with the thoughts she'd been having. She had a very strong feeling that she'd been reliving an experience, and perhaps she had, because once she had lived on a cattle station somewhere in the Northern Territory with Jack. But the thing that was troubling her most of all was the memory of those eyes. Black watchful eyes. Could that have happened before? But if it had, they couldn't possibly have been Jarratt Buchan's eyes. She did a quick calculation. Fourteen—fifteen years ago, he would have been how old? Maybe twenty-one or two--

'What's the matter?' he asked her suddenly. 'Are you all right? You've gone slightly green.'

She felt a dew on her forehead and on the back of her neck, and she thought, 'I'm going off my head. Of course it wasn't Jarratt. Of course it wasn't here.' She longed to tell him what was in her mind, and yet she couldn't. Not possibly. He would think her distinctly odd.

She said quickly, defensively, 'I've had too much sun. And I'm hungry.'

'No lunch?' he enquired.

'Yes, I had lunch.' They had left the shade of the trees and were walking across a wide stretch of red earth towards the homestead. The westering sun cast purple shadows, and the heat was almost tangible. Light in the inland, Nicky reflected, had a special quality. You were deeply aware of its luminosity, its dramatisation of every little thing, so that a blade of grass, an insect, a flower, stood out not just three-dimensionally, but as something seen in a hallucination. She watched her own feet in the thick-soled sneakers, each one as it moved raising a little cloud of dust—a little red sandstorm. *That* was something she had contemplated as a child too.

She put a hand to her brow to push back the fall of hair that made the low slanting rays of the sun a glitter of burnished red in her eyes, and once again she was aware of that man looking at her—that man who Juliet had said wouldn't marry beneath him.

She thought of Howard and she felt a physical ache in her heart. She had been forgetting Howard. It would have been different if he'd been there at the bungalow with Cass; she'd have known by now.

Known what? she asked herself, taken by surprise by the involuntary thought. She walked on beside Jarratt Buchan, but she didn't look at him. Instead, she tried to visualise Howard, and found she couldn't. Yet all the time she had been at school in Adelaide, his face had been as clear to her as though she had seen him yesterday. She had dreamed of him often—not always happy dreams, for there was a recurring one in which he and Cass always ran away from her. But sad or gay, whatever the dream, his face was always clear and familiar—a face she knew like the back of her hand. Now it had vanished.

Light brown hair, she reminded herself in desperation, hazel eyes like Cass's, but with shorter darker lashes. His mouth—young and soft and—he had kissed her once, and his skin had been smooth, young--

She glanced up and saw Jarratt's jaw, dark with stubble, his dark hair, dark brows. His dark eyes. She bit her lip.

'When will the muster be over?'

He looked surprised at the question. 'Not for some time. Coochin Brim-brim is a big property. We have a lot of ground to cover, a lot of cattle to round up—calves and cleanskins to brand, castrating to be done—weaners to be separated from the cows, beasts cut out for sale. Our paddocks are bigger than you could imagine. Why do you ask?'

Nicky's heart had been sinking. She might easily have gone before Howdie came back. Once Tracy was better, Juliet wouldn't want to stay, and she would have to go too.

Guy would be at her as well, insisting that she return to Adelaide. So she would have to ask now.

She took a deep breath. 'I just wondered.' She raised her eyes and sent him a guileless glance. 'I'd like to see part of the muster.'

'You would? Tired of poking about?' There was cynical speculation on his face. 'Well, we should be able to arrange it. You can come out with me some time.' She'd barely murmured 'Thank you,' when he shot out unexpectedly, 'Juliet mentioned you've met Catherine before.'

'Yes.' She told herself she was glad he knew that at least, but it didn't stop her from feeling guilty, or from colouring to show it.

'Why didn't you say so?'

'I hardly thought you'd be interested in—in such a trivial detail.' Oh, what a lie—when he was always asking questions!

'And her brother,' he pursued relentlessly, 'Howard. Have you met him too?'

'Y-yes,' she repeated minimally. Head down, she determinedly watched her feet in the dust.

'Am I right in guessing they're the people whose trail you were on? You said something to that effect to Shirley Capper the day we came up.'

Another guess, and a good one. Nicky sighed, feeling foolishly caught out, more guilty than ever, and hating the feeling. She said pertly, 'Yes, you've guessed right. Imagine your remembering what I said to Shirley Capper!'

Her attitude didn't divert him for a second. 'So who was it you wanted to chase up? Catherine? Or her brother?'

She raised her head, regardless of her flushed face. 'Oh, honestly, do we have to make such a thing of my private business? You ask questions—questions—all the time.'

'Is it bothering you? Surely you have nothing to hide. Catherine's a nice girl, Howard's got good stuff in him, though he suffers from a few hang-ups.'

'What do you mean?'

'Those kids have had to battle. They're still battling. They haven't had it easy like you.'

What did *he* know? As for the Johnstons, she knew a heap more about them than he did. She wanted to say, 'I know all that and a lot more.'

And I haven't always had it easy—my guardian had to battle for opals in the dust of Coober Pedy before he could take me away from the foster- home I was in.' But she wasn't going to say it. She'd had all that out with herself already. It wouldn't do anyone any good, and moreover she was sick and tired of his relentless probing. Thank goodness the girls at school hadn't been so inquisitive! But Jarratt Buchan—he was determined that she would open her heart to him, tell him everything. So he was not getting his way.

'Well, so what about it?' she asked maddeningly, and widened her blue eyes at him.

His wide mouth straightened. 'All right, we won't talk about it. But you can come out with me in a day or two. I'll be going out to the muster camp with fresh supplies for the cook. See if you can talk Juliet into joining the party, will you? It's something she ought to do, as a Buchan. We'll have a night camping out. Does that appeal to you?' There was mockery in his voice, and she wondered if he expected her to renege when he mentioned camping. It was far more likely that he would be the one to pull out of the arrangement if Juliet refused to come—which she was quite likely to do.

She said coolly, 'It sounds great fun. I can hardly wait.'

His smile was enigmatic.

Sure enough, Juliet wasn't in the least interested in the tentative arrangement when Nicky mentioned it to her. She said a definite 'No,' and that was that. 'He'll call it off,' Nicky thought, 'he won't take me on my own.'

A. couple of nights later, Jarratt announced over coffee, 'Tomorrow I'm driving out to the camp. Have you two girls talked about coming along?'

Juliet, who had been contemplating the collage that she had laid out on the sitting room floor, raised her head. 'You must be joking! Go bush—sleep out? Not in a million years!'

Her brother frowned. 'You just don't want to see beyond your own little circle of light, do you?' He looked at Nicky. 'What about you? Have you had second thoughts?'

'No. I'd like to come,' she said firmly.

'You'll be a lone female in a strictly male world,' he warned.

Nicky shrugged. 'I'm not worried.'

They stared at each other and she had no idea what he was thinking. For her part, Nicky was determined to see Howard, and if Jarratt Buchan was going to find it a bore having a lone female on his hands, then that was too bad.

'All right,' he said finally. 'That's settled, then.'

That night she woke with thumping heart to the sound of a child's sobbing, and for a fleeting instant she thought she was away back in the past at the foster-home, where it was not unusual for the little ones to cry in the night when they first came. She tumbled out of bed, switching on the reading lamp as she did so, and groped for the slinky silk jersey housegown she had bought on Claudia's advice in Adelaide —because the 'garment' she had used at boarding school had been J:oo hopelessly unattractive, according to Guy's sister. Juliet's room was still in darkness as she went quietly past, which was not surprising because Juliet's ear wasn't attuned to the distress of small children.

It was Medora, she discovered when she reached the children's room. She had fallen out of bed and given herself a fright. Nicky turned on

the night light and discovered Marcie-Ann angelically asleep, and stooping, she lifted the little one and took her in her arms.

'It's all right, darling, Nicky's here. You just tumbled out of bed, that's all. Wasn't it a silly old thing to do?'

The child clung to her, whimpering a little, but half asleep again already, and as Nicky cuddled her and murmured soft comforting words, her amazingly long lashes fluttered down against her sleep-flushed cheeks, and presently Nicky was able to put her back under the sheet. For a few moments she stroked the curly head and then when she was sure the child was sound asleep, she straightened up with a little sigh.

To discover Jarratt standing in the doorway, watching her with a quizzical expression in his smouldering dark eyes.

Nicky caught her breath, and wondered how long he had been there. He wore pyjama trousers but was naked from the waist up, and his chest hair showed dark and curling on the broad bronzed expanse of his torso.

'Everything okay?' His eyebrows rose interrogatively and his voice was so low that Nicky was suddenly conscious of the quiet of the house and of the huge empty endless dark outside. She nodded, and moved, feeling the cool smoothness of the silky jersey swishing against her calves and her bare ankles, aware at the same time that those lazy eyes had travelled slowly down from her face to the curve of her bosom, revealed by the clinging garments she wore. She didn't know what she expected as she drew nearer to him, but her heart was beating quickly.

She made herself say, in a whisper, 'Medora had fallen out of bed, that's all.'

'You must sleep lightly,' he commented. He let her pass him, then murmured, 'Or were you awake thinking about tomorrow?'

'Of course not,' she said quickly. 'I wake easily, that's all.'

'I see... Would you like a glass of milk before you go back to bed?'

She had no idea why she said yes instead of no—because she wasn't hungry, or thirsty either. Yet she said yes, and moved ahead of him towards the kitchen. There she stood awkwardly leaning against the wall while he took glasses from the dresser, and the milk jug from the fridge.

'Quiet, isn't it?' he commented as he handed her a glass. 'No 'Cars or buses whizzing by, no next door neighbours holding a party. No city glow on the horizon even. We're in an empty world, just you and I.'

His words were disquieting and she sipped her milk, swallowing audibly in her nervousness.

'So you're coming with me tomorrow despite Juliet's lack of interest,' he stated rather than asked. 'I'd hoped you wouldn't wriggle out of it. It will be something new for you, won't it?'

'Yes,' she agreed reluctantly.

'But as far as you're concerned, that's not the draw, is it?'

'What—what do you mean?'

He perched himself on the edge of the table, and she blinked and looked away from the male nakedness of his chest, and his hair, tousled from sleep.

'I'm not altogether sure what I mean,' he murmured after a minute, 'but I know you had something in mind when you angled for an invitation to come out with me.'

Nicky crimsoned slowly as his eyes held hers once more. He didn't know about Howdie and how she felt about him, so—did he imagine she was coming because of *him*? Quite definitely she wasn't, but she wasn't going to make a full confession about Howdie—that was private and personal business, that was part of a dream, and she closed her eyes for a fleeting instant trying to conjure up Howdie's face and managing instead, infuriatingly, to see Jarratt Buchan's. She opened her eyes with a grimace.

'What would I have in mind?' she demanded. 'It's all very simple, as you'd realise if you put yourself in my position. I haven't seen much of your cattle station since I've been here. It's not much fun to go out riding on one's own, and Juliet doesn't like horses--'

'Oh, Juliet!' he exclaimed impatiently. 'It's a pity she can't put herself out for other people now and again.'

'She does.' Nicky sprang instantly to Juliet's defence. 'She came out here, didn't she?'

'And so she should, seeing her sister's laid up in hospital.'

'But Catherine's looking after the children,' Nicky persisted. 'And—and you're not really her concern, are you?'

Anyhow, Juliet says you don't need a sister, you need--'

She stopped and bit her lip, and drank down the rest of her milk.

'I need a wife,' he finished for her, his dark eyes glinting. 'Well, that's a topic I don't intend discussing with you, though I know marriage is a subject dear to a woman's heart.'

'Not—not to mine,' she interrupted, confused. 'Girl's don't spend all their time dreaming about getting married these days—there are lots of other things to do.'

'I'm sure there are. However, I thought it was the desirability of *my* marriage that was under the microscope—not yours.' She coloured furiously and he laughed. 'I haven't had much of a chance to talk to you so far, have I, Nicky?'

'To ask me questions, you mean,' she said defensively.

'If you like to put it that way. What with helping Catherine with her lessons and catching up on problems connected with my way of earning a living, I've been a poor host. We'll have to start remedying that tomorrow.' He moved towards her and she felt herself shrink back a little, but he only reached for her glass and put it on the sink, then told her casually, 'Don't bring that slinky seductive-looking garment you're wearing along with you to the muster, will you? Not that I don't like it, but--' He paused and his eyes had that warm look in them that she found so disturbing she had to lower her lashes to escape it. 'I'll take along a tent for you to sleep in, and you can please yourself whether you bring pyjamas or not—but you won't need anything like that to drift around in.'

'You must think I'm off my head if I don't know that,' she said stiffly, and covered her mouth with her hand to stifle a yawn that was not quite genuine. 'I'm going to bed. Goodnight, and thanks for the drink.'

'I hope it gives you pleasant dreams,' he said.

Nicky felt vaguely uneasy next morning about leaving Juliet on her own, and it was little consolation to think that Cass would be there. There didn't seem to be much rapport between them, and she was well aware that Juliet thought Cass was given too many privileges for

someone who was working for her living. As well there was her conviction, which Nicky didn't share, that Cass had her eye on Jarratt.

However, all that was left behind once she was on her way in the utility with Jarratt. The back of the vehicle was loaded up with fresh provisions for the musterers, and Nicky's own gear—a change of socks and underwear, a pair of short pyjamas and her toilet bag, a fresh blouse—were packed in a small soft bag that Cass had loaned her. Cass would have liked to be coming today too. Nicky had been aware of that when she had slipped out to the schoolroom to say goodbye, but of course it was out of the question.

'Give my love to Howdie,' Cass instructed. 'Oh, I wish I could see the look on his face when you turn up! He'll be just knocked out.'

Now, Nicky felt slightly sick with apprehension as Jarratt drove the ute along the rough red track through the never-ending spinifex grass and scattered mulga. She tried to imagine her meeting with Howard, and she didn't know why she should feel slightly afraid. What if he didn't even recognise her? And what did he look like now? The thing was, he was a man now, and she was a woman. They had been so young when last they met. She had been not quite fourteen—but as much in love as a girl of that age is capable of being. And she had hung on to that feeling—that dream—for years. Now she felt full of nerves and uncertainties. Her hands were clasped tightly together in her lap and she stared ahead of her, seeing nothing that actually existed—seeing instead a blurred image of a disconcerting faceless Howard, and of herself running to meet him. She started when Jarry's voice said, 'Relax! What's worrying you, Nicky?'

'Nothing. I was just—thinking.'

'Of what? Or should I say, of whom? Your handsome guardian?'

She shrugged, drew a deep breath and leaning back in the seat she forced herself to give her attention to what was outside the car—the ring of low, flat-topped red hills they were driving towards, the river red gums that lined the dry watercourse that wound through the spinifex, the vermillion of the double track they were following. Red dust clouded out behind the utility like smoke, and against the blue of the sky the powdery white trunks and limbs of ghost gums were spread. There was a strange familiarity about it all so piercing that it hurt, and she knew she must have seen country like this long ago, before she was five years old, when she had lived in the bush with Jack.

Soon they were driving between the walls of the red gorge, deep purple shadows lay across the track, pools of soft blue water reflected rock and sky and flower and flying bird, as a hawk appeared from nowhere and wheeled high above. The rose red of the vertical cliffs on either side glowed incandescent and beautiful and remote. This land— this hunting ground—had once belonged to some aboriginal tribe, long since dispersed, yet it seemed still to be haunted by the shadows of tall dark, almost naked men, moving gracefully through the sunlight, spears upraised...

The track had petered out now, and Jarratt steered the utility skilfully along the pale sandy bed of the river, dodging boulders and pools of water. Nicky, looking about her alertly and with a kind of inner excitement, caught a glimpse of a couple of small rock wallabies hopping away into the shadows.

'You're all eyes,' Jarratt commented. 'It might interest you to know that this is a track we can't always use. When there's been a good fall of rain further upstream, this river bed swirls with water that reaches ten or fifteen feet— maybe more—up the gorge walls.'

'Then how do you get out to the other side of the run?'

'We do an extra fifteen miles.'

They talked on and off after that, but impersonally, about the land, the birds and animals, the cattle, and then at last they reached the muster camp, where Jarratt pulled up in tree shade. The men had lunched, and were in the process of resaddling their horses for the afternoon's work. Nicky, her heart bumping, sought among them for Howdie. They all wore checked shirts, narrow-legged trousers, wide-brimmed stockmen's hats, and she felt hopelessly frustrated. Surely—surely—she would know if she saw Howard, but -she felt no leap of recognition as, sitting in the utility, she searched and searched. The cook had come across from his truck, and he and Jarratt were unloading the supplies from the back of the ute. Nicky turned in her seat so she could see the mob of cattle that had been rounded up, and now she saw there were three stockmen slowly circling the mob to hold it. Howard must be one of those three men. He *must* be. She thrust open the door and slid out, pulling on the cotton hat she had bought in Alice, and putting on the sunglasses she had discarded a few minutes previously.

Jarratt turned sharply. 'Where are you off to?'

'To—to see the cattle,' she stammered.

'Well, just hold on,' he said. It was such a definite command she stopped dead in her tracks despite herself. 'We'll have some tucker first, then you can see as much of the cattle as you want. The men are taking them over to the yards now, and it will be more interesting for you to see them cutting out and branding than to go careering off in the heat now just to gawp. Besides, you must be hungry, and I certainly am.'

Nicky gritted her teeth and bowed to fate in the form of Jarratt Buchan, and fifteen minutes later, when the cattle had disappeared in a slow cloud of red dust, she was eating a delectable barbecued steak

and a hunk of bread—made by the cook in his gas oven, she guessed—and drinking billy tea that won, hands down, over anything ever brewed in a pot.

As she ate, she thought of Howdie riding out under the burning sun with the cattle, and wondered how he would feel if he knew she was here. How would he react when he saw her? Would he recognise her instantly? Ridiculously, she longed to look like the almost-fourteen-year-old girl she had been when last they met—perhaps not so much age-wise as clothes-wise, character-wise. She was wearing tough blue jeans, but the shirts she had bought in Alice were lightweight and cool rather than utilitarian. The one she was wearing now was pale blue and she wished it was checked, like the ones Cass wore. Holding out her mug for more tea, she worried over her image. Did it shout 'Ladies' College'? Would Howard feel alienated? And would she look better in the other shirt she had put in her pack—the red one? Yet suppose she wanted to change—Quite suddenly she was very much aware of the all-male environment into which she had been projected.

The cook and his assistant had finished packing up their gear, the campfire had been put out, the truck was on the move. There were only herself and Jarratt left now. The string of horses led by the horse-tailor was on its way through the spinifex grass of the endless paddock, and Nicky was suddenly far more aware of being alone with Jarratt than she had been in the utility. Her thoughts raced ahead to the night, when she would be sleeping out, though he had said she would have a tent. She felt vulnerable, alone, doubtful about coming—suspicious that in bringing her along Jarratt had been issuing a challenge of some sort, or testing out a theory.

She looked at him wearily. He was packing up the utensils they had used for their meal, but now his dark eyes glanced over at her amusedly as she sat in the red sand, her back against a tree.

'You're looking pale. Are you wishing you hadn't come?'

'Of course not.' She asked a question of her own. 'Why did you bring me along?'

He looked surprised. 'You wanted to come.'

'Yes, but you didn't have to let me. Why did you?'

He shrugged his broad shoulders. 'It will do you good. Besides, I guess you're curious. Women are like cats that way—curious. And sometimes it gets them into trouble. Nevertheless, I'd sooner a woman was adventurous than not—even if she has to take a beating now and again. Do you want to go down to the waterhole and have a wash? Take your time, and when you're ready we'll be on our way.'

'Thank you.' She needed a little time alone, and down by the waterhole it was quite secluded, with trees around and a few birds fluttering, and the peculiar silence of the outback that was not really silence at all, but full of minute singing sounds. She sluiced her face in the cool water, reflecting how Clear it was. She could see green weed growing at the bottom, see her own reflection—her face slightly flushed from the heat, her hair, now she had removed the cotton hat, a bit of a mess. She could feel it clinging stickily to the back of her neck where she was perspiring.

She took her time, but when she emerged into the open again, Jarratt wasn't there. She walked leisurely across to the utility and climbed in. Jarratt's cigarettes and matches were there and she took a smoke from the packet and lit up, leaned back against the seat and inhaled. At school the older girls had been allowed to smoke if they had their parents' written permission, but it was not approved of. Jack had never given his permission, so if Nicky smoked, as she had now and again, it was guiltily. She felt guilty now, partly because of that, partly because Guy didn't like her smoking either.

When Jarratt reappeared, strolling across to the ute with his rather swaggeringly lordly air, she looked him straight in the eye and blew smoke. But all he said was, 'Ready?' / Then he climbed in beside her and started up the motor.

Quite suddenly he switched it off again and sat, eyes narrowed, staring ahead of him. Somehow disturbed, she finished her cigarette and looked around for somewhere to crush it out.

He turned his head.

'Don't toss that butt out of the car—we don't want to start a fire. It may not look much, but this is some of my best grazing land.' He handed her a tin lid from the top of the dashboard, and, a little put out because she certainly hadn't intended being so careless with her cigarette, Nicky mashed the butt out in the improvised ashtray. Her hand was shaking and she was very conscious that he was watching her. She had the feeling anything might happen—though what could happen she had no idea. It was sheer nervousness that made her ask for another cigarette, a request that he ignored completely. She was about to repeat it when she found her eyes locked with his.

'What's behind that veneer of maturity of yours, Nicky?' he asked suddenly, his voice oddly tense. 'I haven't got the strength of you yet—not by any means. I can't get near to you—questions make you curl up. Are you scared of me for some reason? Or do you want--' He stopped, and there was that expression in his eyes again that made her pulse rate quicken, made the colour rise in her cheeks, made her lashes flutter. Then abruptly he moved and pulled her against him, twisting her body round so sharply and decisively that his mouth had found hers before she had the least idea what was happening. She had been kissed before, of course—there had been boys, young men about, even on her carefully planned vacations. And there had been Guy. But this was different. Completely. And whether or not Jarratt queried her 'veneer of maturity', he kissed her as though she were a

woman—with no concessions. She felt his lips, his teeth, his tongue. Her whole body burned and a tiny river of perspiration ran down between her breasts. His body was hot too, but rock hard, well under control.

'The right man,' he said when he had finished with her—and as he spoke he was reaching for his cigarettes—'could make what he liked of you.'

Nicky didn't know what he meant, and she had no idea what to say. Her head was spinning. She didn't know why he had kissed her, or why she had submitted—as she had submitted. It had been her instinctive reaction, for heaven knew what reasons. But now she was all uncertainty. What on earth must he think?

'Why did you do that?' she asked shakily, not looking at him—not daring to. Her breathing was fast and there was something unnerving in the fact that he could now so casually light up a cigarette with fingers that were, when she glanced at them from the shelter of her lashes, completely steady.

'Why? I guess I've been hovering on the brink of it ever since first I met you. And from your—co-operation—I'd guess you've been expecting it too. Do you want to talk about it?'

Her cheeks were hot. *'I haven't* been expecting it! And I—I don't want to talk about it, whatever you mean. There's—there's nothing to talk about.'

'There's not?' His mouth curved in a crooked smile. 'Okay. If you see it that way--' He stuck the cigarette in the corner of his mouth and started up the car again and this time got it moving. 'I'm going to look around here first, make sure there aren't any stray beasts lurking in the scrub. You might keep your eyes skinned too.'

It was gently rolling country, its open woodland consisting mostly of mulga trees and a few corkwoods, and he drove slowly, ignoring her and ignoring, too, the fact that she wasn't having a particularly comfortable ride as he swung the utility over the spinifex clumps and dodged among the trees and the giant termite mounds. When she glanced at him, he looked quite absorbed—lynx-eyed— seeing to it that his ringers had done a thorough job.

She didn't know how long they drove, but not a beast moved in the shadows of the scrub, not a creature was to be seen lying in the grasses.

It was mid-afternoon when they caught up with the musterers again, and Nicky discovered the yards to consist of no more than an open-ended horseshoe shape of wire and posts. She had expected the usual cattle yards, but before she could ask Jarratt a single question, he had pulled up in the shade and got out of the truck without a word, jerking his wide-brimmed hat forward over his forehead, and she watched him stride away from her.

She leaned back exhaustedly and, keeping her sunglasses on, looked over at the yards where the work was going on. It wasn't long before she picked out Howard from the lean dark-skinned stockmen. He was riding at the open end of the yard, and his job was evidently to keep the jostling cattle from breaking away. The head stockman, a wiry weatherbeaten-looking character, rode along the outside of the fence, selected the beast to be cut out and worked it with his stockwhip to the open end and drafted it out. The business of branding and castrating was tough work for tough men, and Nicky watched the beasts being leg-roped and thrown, and she was part fascinated, part repelled by the swiftness of the operations.

She watched till the scene began to swim and waver and her eyes closed...

When she opened them again, she was instantly wide awake. A man was striding towards the utility, and with a shock that made her heart beat fast, she saw that it was Howard. He no longer wore his stockman's hat, and his thick brown hair was dulled with dust. Nicky stayed where she was, watching him come, thinking that it was happening at last, yet curiously reluctant to move and unable to analyse her reaction. Unmounted, he didn't seem as tall as she remembered him, but he looked older than his twenty-one or -two years, and a lot harder. And he was *thin*. But very, very good-looking, and very suntanned.

So this was it.

CHAPTER FIVE

NICKY moved at last.

With fingers that trembled a little, she manipulated the door handle and got out of the utility. The sun was in her eyes and she had a smile ready, but it was wavering. Quite suddenly she was aware of nervousness, of uncertainty, of a number of nameless doubts. Then Howard had reached her, and his darkly lashed eyes were looking down into her own. They were hazel eyes like Cass's, but lacking totally in dreaminess. In fact, the impression she got from Howard's eyes was that he'd been around, and she wondered if Cass had played down the hardness of the times they'd been through since they'd left Alice.

He said, after a long moment during which they both stood motionless staring at each other, 'It *is* Nicky, isn't it?' and he put out his hands to her.

'Oh—Howdie!' she said chokingly, laughingly. Then her arms were around him tightly and he was holding her hard, and she smelt dust and sweat and felt the heat of his hard, sinewy body. She said, her face turned in to his shoulder, 'I couldn't believe you and Cass were here—I looked for you in Alice. Isn't it--'

'It's great,' said Howard. 'Let's have a look at you.' He held her away from him and looked at her, half-smiling. 'I thought it was some crazy joke when Jarratt Buchan told me you were in that ute. You've changed, Nicky—you've had your hair cut and you've lost your—*orphan* look. In fact—well, you're some looker, and too classy for me!' He raised his eyebrows and glanced down at his dusty boots, his far from clean shirt and his crumpled trousers. 'I'm hardly fit for unexpected female company, am I? How long are you staying?'

'At the camp? Just overnight--'

'At Coochin Brim-brim, I meant. What are you doing here, anyway? Did he'—with a movement of his head that she took to indicate Jarratt Buchan—'invite you?'

There was a hard look in his eyes and she felt herself colour. 'Jarratt? Of course not,' she said quickly. 'I never even met him till it was all arranged. I came out with Juliet, his sister—well, his half-sister, really. We were at school together.' She stopped, feeling she was babbling.

'I get it.' The smile was back in her eyes, and she wondered if he'd imagined Jarratt might be in love with her—which was a laugh. Her thoughts skidded quickly away from that topic. 'So you're here for how long?'

'Till Tracy comes home from hospital, whenever that will be.'

'Let's hope we'll manage to see something of each other, then.'

'Oh, we must,' she agreed.

'I might, just possibly, work it so that I can get in to the homestead on Saturday night. It wouldn't have been hard if I'd had my motor-bike out here. I'll have a word with the boss, anyhow.'

'Jarratt?' she faltered.

'Wally Barker, the head stockman. He's not a bad sort of bloke. The trouble is, we're a bit light on when it comes to transport and this is such a damned big place. Still, we'll see ... How have you and Cass been getting on together? You're one friend she's never forgotten—she gets quite maudlin over you at times.'

Nicky smiled. 'I never forgot her either. Or—or you,' she added, and as she said it it sounded not quite real, more like a line from a play. Things just didn't happen in real life the way you dreamed them. But

then she'd never dreamed of meeting up with Howard in the red dust in the middle of nowhere, with a mob of stockmen knocking off from the day's work and—when she glanced around—watching her and Howard curiously.

'I'd have thought you'd have forgotten us pretty quickly, once—you went off to your classy boarding school.'

'I wrote,' she said, 'but you didn't answer.'

'We never heard.'

'Cass told me.'

'We were shifted around after you went. Things were really crook. They were cows of people at the new place—if your letter was sent on, they wouldn't have bothered seeing we got it. Cass and I weren't any too popular. It was my fault, I suppose, and Cass was always so loyal about sticking up for me. But I was too old to be shoved around, and so we finally cleared out. Meanwhile, you were in clover, weren't you?'

'In a way,' she said, flushing. Howard had changed more than Cass had, or at any rate, she was finding it harder to rediscover him. He was blunt, too, and he seemed to be emphasising the difference between them—unless she was imagining it. As if she must have become a completely different person because she had gone away to boarding school. But she hadn't—inside she was exactly the same. Or almost, she amended.

She raised her head. 'I didn't like boarding school all that much. It wasn't easy to make friends, and—and I missed you and Cass dreadfully.'

He listened, but his darkly lashed eyes looked her over in a way that was totally unfamiliar, curiously, as though she belonged to a different breed.

'What's it like having money? Doing what you like—tripping round the countryside with girls like what's-her-name Buchan?'

He paused and Nicky shook her head helplessly, aware of tears deep inside her. Her life wasn't in the least the way he saw it.

'I suppose you live with your guardian now in some big house in the city,' he went on.

'No, Jack died just recently. He was in hospital in Adelaide for months—ever since I left school.'

'Oh. I didn't know,' he said uncomfortably. 'I'm sorry about that. I suppose you're feeling pretty cut up.' He ran his fingers through his hair. 'I'd better get cleaned up. We can talk some more later on.'

'Yes, of course.' She felt faintly relieved as they smiled at each other, and then, when he had walked away, she drew a deep and trembling breath. She felt disturbed and frustrated—cheated, perhaps. She had wanted everything to be the same, and obviously it wasn't. So much of what had been seemed to have vanished. They had hugged each other, yet essentially Howdie was—a stranger. She'd thought he'd be warm and welcoming and talkative like Cass, which was stupid, because men were different—they didn't babble on like girls. But she was convinced that if only they had been able to meet normally at the homestead, instead of out here, it would all have been a lot easier. She felt more than a little weepy, but it would never do to give way to it. Not here, with the stockmen moving about the camp, and in the shade of some trees, Jarratt Buchan erecting a small tent—for her.

Nicky pulled herself together and went over to stand watching him, and he turned to ask her, 'Conversation concluded? Where did you say you'd met Howard Johnston?'

Her cheeks flushed. 'In—in Alice. Why do you ask?'

'Well,' he drawled, 'that reunion—it was certainly dramatic. Tears and hugs and kisses. I'm sure every man in the camp who witnessed it is now convinced that you and that stockman mean something special to each other.'

She wanted to retort, 'Perhaps we do,' but she couldn't quite manage it. She merely said offhandedly, 'I can't be worried what they think. It's my business, anyhow.' She peered inside the tent. It had a central pole, and no guy ropes, but was simply anchored to the ground by metal pegs hammered through eyelets at each corner. Jarratt had tossed a sleeping bag inside and now he said dryly, 'I get the message—no questions. I'm going to ask you one, however. Would you like a softer mattress than the ground? If so, I'll get you a few clumps of spinifex grass.'

'Don't bother,' she said stiffly, and he grinned at her maddeningly.

'It's no bother.'

She followed him and watched while with his booted foot he kicked out a few big tussocks of spinifex that grew among the Mitchell grasses. The leaves were long and spiky, and she wondered how on earth they could make a mattress, but she understood when he arranged them underside up on the floor of her tent. She spread her sleeping bag on top and looked at it with satisfaction. In a way, she regretted that she wasn't to sleep in the open, but since Jarratt had organised the tent then she knew better than to argue. At least she would be able to keep the flap rolled up, so she could see the stars.

'Romantic, isn't it?' he commented as she emerged again. 'But don't let it give you ideas.'

'I don't know what you mean,' she said coldly, refusing to look at him.

'Don't you? ... Now I'll show you where you can have a wash and a tidy up.' He touched her arm, but she moved swiftly away from him, though she followed him through the trees to a place by the water.

'You'll be able to wash here without any difficulty. But just make it a wash—no skinny-dipping. If you have a swimsuit, all right.'

She nodded and refrained from telling him that she wouldn't strip down to her skin with a camp full of stockmen in the vicinity. 'I'll get my towel and soap now before the light goes,' she told him.

'Just a moment,' he said sharply as she turned away, and she found herself obeying him automatically.

'What?'

'Listen to me, Nicky,' he said after a moment. 'I'm beginning to catch on to why you were so eager to come out here with me today—and, something that's puzzled me all along, why you were so intent on shaking off that handsome guardian of yours back in Alice. An affair with a stockman would definitely not be encouraged, would it?'

Nicky listened in some bewilderment. In a curious way what he said was right, yet the way he said it made it completely wrong. He made her sound like a scheming little adventuress—which she was not. There was no 'affair'. The fact was, he didn't know a thing about her and Howard—unless Howard had talked to him this afternoon. She had opened her mouth to utter some kind of a protest when he said quizzically, 'Am I right in guessing that your friendship with the Johnstons isn't all that old? That you met them in Alice when they went in to the Rodeo three or four weeks ago?'

Her eyes widened in surprise. 'Of course you're not right! I knew Cass and Howdie years ago—when I lived in Alice.'

Now he was surprised, and she felt a small sense of triumph.

'Good God!' he exclaimed, his eyes narrowing. 'I had no idea you'd ever lived in Alice Springs.'

'Well, I did, so you don't know everything, do you? I went to school there, and--' She stopped suddenly, regaining her caution right on the brink of telling him far more than she wanted to. 'Don't blab out everything,' she could hear Jack telling her, and she bit back the words that would have come.

He studied her thoughtfully, then when she didn't say any more, he told her, 'Nonetheless, I'm going to do what I intended and give you a word of warning. I'll admit that I don't know a great deal about young Howard Johnston, but the facts relevant to this particular situation are that he's an adult male, and that out in these parts, a stockman probably doesn't see a pretty girl in months. And when he does, he can be pretty eager. So—watch it.'

Nicky would have liked to slap his face. In fact, she very nearly did. Her cheeks slowly crimsoned and she found she was clenching her fists. That was great, coming from him, wasn't it, considering the way he'd kissed her only a few hours ago? Her voice was shaking with indignation when she told him, 'You shouldn't judge everyone by yourself. Howard isn't like that—not in the least.'

He gave a low and derisive laugh. 'Come off it, Nicky—you don't really believe that.'

'I do believe it, because it's true and I know. Howard *isn't* like that. He—I—when we were young, we--' She stopped. It was hopeless to try to explain to this cynical man, and anyhow she didn't want to. He could just mind his own business.

But she had said enough to give Jarratt a lead, and with his propensity for guessing, he worked out the rest for himself.

'What did you do? Swap friendship rings? And one day he kissed you and you've treasured the memory ever since? I'm a little surprised, because quite frankly I wouldn't have classed you as the mawkish hearts and flowers type.'

She turned away angrily. 'Wouldn't you? I'd rather be that way than—than cynical and materialistic.'

'That's what I am, is it? Well, you're part way right. But for you—you're nineteen, aren't you?—there should be a happy medium. You're intelligent enough. And I had the impression in the utility this afternoon—remember?—that you were somewhere near attaining it. You handled that situation quite well.'

'Is that meant to be a compliment? Because I don't feel complimented. And don't think I—I enjoyed the—the situation,' she flared.

He completely ignored her outburst. 'To return to my words of advice—I *am* just a little bit responsible for you while you're here, whether you admit to it or not. So please remember what I've said and watch you don't titillate Howard Johnston's senses unduly. Times have changed. You're no longer a child.'

Nicky pressed her lips together, seething with the indignity of it all, longing to turn and run away but knowing quite certainly that if she did so he would haul her back. And against those powerful muscular arms she wouldn't have a chance.

'When you've had your tucker tonight,' he pursued, 'see you stick around the campfire with the rest of us, will you? Don't be persuaded to go wandering off into the dark. The advances of a love-starved stockman, even if he's spent the day in the saddle, aren't always too easy to fend off.'

'Is that all?' she asked tightly when he stopped.

'I think so. As long as you've got the message.'

She turned and went quickly back towards her tent. What a colossal cheek he had! He was positively insulting. She knew volumes more about Howdie than he did. Howard would never behave as Jarratt implied—particularly not with her. So she would do as she pleased, and Jarratt Buchan couldn't stop her.

She fetched her soap and towel, but she barely had time to wash before it was dark. As she came back from the waterhole, the apricot of the sky flared briefly to crimson. There was a torch on her sleeping bag—she supposed she had Jarratt to thank for that—but she didn't need it yet. She changed into her other blouse, the red one, and brushed her hair, hoping to get some of the dust out of it. Then, on the point of emerging from her tent, she hesitated. It wasn't easy being the only female around. It would have been nicer if Juliet—or Cass—had been here.

The campfire was sending showers of sparks heavenwards, the sky was darkening to purple, and the stars had begun to burst open like silver-gilt flowers. She heard the cook call, 'Come and get it!' and she saw the men line up with their plates, then move off to squat in the light of the fire and eat and yarn. She wished Howdie would come and fetch her, it was difficult to make the move herself, to stroll over into that company of rough, good hearted males.

It was Jarratt, not Howard, who came for her finally.

'What's up? Aren't you hungry? Or aren't we civilised enough for you?' he asked with kindly mockery. He took her arm and she let him. 'Come along.'

There was a small canvas stool for her to sit on, and Jarratt brought her a plate piled with vegetables and a sizzling tender steak. Howdie

strolled over and settled on the ground beside her, and Jarratt took the other side, but luckily he was occupied in talking to Wally Barker, the head stockman, most of the time, so she could forget him—or try to.

Shd "talked to Howard, though she was very very careful over what she said, because she knew Jarratt Buchan wasn't above listening to other people's conversations. She let the burden fall on Howdie by asking him questions about the stockwork, and she solved the mystery of that open-ended holding yard.

'The stock don't get so bruised or knocked about shoving against each other,' Howard explained. 'That open end gives them room to spread.'

Howard had his share of boiled fruit pudding and custard, but Nicky passed it up, and then, when they had both drunk a mugful of steaming tea, he said, 'Let's take a walk, Nicky.'

'I'd like that,' she agreed, getting up from her stool.

Immediately, as she might have guessed, she had Jarratt's attention.

'Remember what I was saying to you earlier, Nicky,' he said laconically, his black eyes glinting in the firelight.

Nicky didn't answer. She walked away with Howard.

'What did he say to you earlier?'

She shrugged. 'Oh, I don't know. He's always talking at me.'

'You don't sound as though you go much on him.'

'No.'

'He's all right. He's a bit wrapped up in Cass, I reckon. She took his eye the minute we landed here looking for work.' Howard had his arm

around her waist now, and they strolled along slowly. Nicky was very conscious of the big sky overhead, the brightness of the stars, the fading voices, the diminished glow from the campfire, but most of all she was disturbed by what Howard said. Was Jarratt wrapped up in Cass? And if so, why should it disturb her?

They reached some trees in the midst of which was a stretch of relatively smooth sandy ground and they sat down there, Howard with his legs stretched out, Nicky with knees bent, her arms resting on them.

'Cass has had the hell of a life tagging along with me, you know,' Howard said. 'In a way, we hamper one another. This is the biggest break she's had, this job at Coochin Brim-brim.'

'It's good that she can study for her exams too,' said Nicky. 'She always wanted to be a teacher.'

'Yeah, she used to talk about that sort of-thing a lot. When she mentioned it to Jarry Buchan, he had this idea she should do correspondence lessons. But maybe old Cass'll do even better for herself than teaching. She's handy in a lot of ways—she can cook and sew, and she's good with kids and she doesn't talk too much. As well as that, she's pretty. But not near as pretty as you, Nicky.' He paused and reaching out pulled her over against his shoulder, and she leaned against him thinking of what he had said. Did he mean Cass might marry Jarratt? Or was he thinking in terms of housekeeping? Nicky wasn't really in any doubt as to the answer, but she didn't ask Howard to elucidate.

'Anyhow,' he said against her ear, 'what about you, Nicky Reay? Are you in love or engaged or anything? I suppose these days, you know all the right people—the guys with the money--'

'I don't know anyone much,' Nicky protested. 'And I'm not engaged to be married or—or in love,' she faltered, thinking of the romantic dreams she had dreamed of Howard.

'Tell us about this guardian of yours—Jack. Did he leave you provided for?'

'Oh yes. He left me quite a lot of money—and some opals.'

'Opals?'

'Yes. He made his money digging for opals. Didn't you know? He lived in Coober Pedy. He was—well, kind of rough and simple. I'd have gone to live with him this year,' she added earnestly. 'It's no fun not having anyone of your own, Howdie. You and Cass have always had each other.'

'Yes, it does help. Still, you've got friends—you've got the Buchans, for instance.' He paused. 'Funny that we should meet again here, isn't it, seeing we've travelled such different roads. You a guest, me and Cass on the working side of the deal. I tell you, it was a very pleasant surprise seeing you today.' As he spoke, he altered his position slightly so that now her face, instead of being against his shoulder, was turned towards his, and she could feel the warmth of his breath.

'I'm glad you're here, Nicky,' he said huskily. 'You're a sweet kid—you always were.'

His lips found hers and she didn't resist, but after a moment she tensed. His kiss was becoming more passionate than was comfortable—or even allowable—and he was slowly but inexorably pulling her down on the sand beside him. She began to struggle and try to free herself, and when she managed to tear her lips away from his she whispered agitatedly, 'Howdie, don't—*don't--*'

He didn't free her, and she was frightened by his strength. He muttered, 'I won't hurt you, Nicky. Just let yourself go--'

At that moment she heard the crackling of twigs, and so did he, for instantly she was free.

'Nicky?' It was Jarratt Buchan's voice, and biting her lip in mortification, she struggled up. Howard got up too, and they were both on their feet when Jarratt appeared. Nicky's breath was erratic, and she wondered how much he had heard—how much he had seen—and she hated him for tailing her, for contriving to make her feel—cheap, for that was how she did feel, even though the man was Howard whom she had known so long ago.

She could see Jarratt's eyes glittering as he said curtly, 'There's some tea made. You two might as well refresh yourselves before you turn in for the night. It's an early start in the morning,' he concluded, his voice abrupt, unfriendly.

Howard put his arm around Nicky, sighed audibly and said with perfect sangfroid, 'I might have known I wouldn't be allowed to have the only girl around the place to myself for long.'

'That's right,' Jarratt agreed, 'you're not allowed.'

They began to walk back towards the campfire. Nicky wished Howard hadn't been so insistent just now as he had pulled her down on the ground beside him. It was something she hadn't expected of him—not so soon, not so— inconsiderately. Though even if Jarry hadn't come along, she was sure—she was *sure*—everything would have been all right. Howard wouldn't have done anything she didn't want—and they would have talked again. She was conscious of an odd feeling of despair all the same, and she knew it was not due to having Jarratt take over. She suddenly didn't feel like having Howard's arm around her, and she slipped away from his touch and

stumbled a little on the uneven ground. Jarratt caught her arm to steady her and she thrust him away too.

The two men began to talk unconcernedly about the work that was to be done tomorrow, and Nicky, walking between them, feeling isolated, alone, wondered how they could. She felt both angry and mortified at the way they ignored her. It was as if she didn't matter—as if she were an object merely, and fleetingly she hated them both. But mainly, she hated Jarratt. She supposed he was feeling pleased with himself for catching her out in something that she had been so certain wouldn't happen, and she felt sick, nauseated. She wanted to go away and be by herself.

Meanwhile, Jarratt was telling Howard, 'You're not doing too badly. Wally says you've got the makings of a good stockman in you.'

'Stockwork's not my ultimate ambition,' said Howard, 'I've got plenty of other ideas.'

Back at the camp, the men were still sitting yarning in the firelight, and red and gold sparks flew upward against the impenetrable dark of the outback sky. It was all so beautiful, yet it was all spoiled, and Nicky's heart was aching.

She took her mug of tea and went to stand by herself and steady her nerves. Howard was talking to the cook and to Wally Barker, smiling, self-assured, and she watched him for a while and found his face in the firelight totally unfamiliar. She wondered how he could ignore her now, how he could laugh and talk and act so unconcernedly when she was in an agony of hurt pride inside. Didn't he have even an inkling of that? And what must the cook and the head stockman—oh, and all the other men—think they had been doing in the shadows of the trees? Of course, she reflected bitterly, they must all take it for granted that Howard had been making love to her. Oh God! She wished futilely now that she hadn't wandered off with Howard.

But it had been *Howdie*—her Howdie. It hadn't been just any stockman.

Yes, times have changed, she thought cynically. As Jarratt had said, she was no longer a child. And Howard was a man, a man whom she didn't know very well. But not for the life of her would she admit that Jarratt had been right. Not to him. Only—just a little—to herself. Because Howard *wasn't* like that...

She raised her head and looked cautiously at Jarratt. At least he was leaving her alone. She couldn't have borne it if he'd come to say 'I told you so'. As it was, he wasn't even looking at her. He too was standing apart from the others, and his face looked sombre, remote, absorbed. She thought unexpectedly, 'He looks like a man who lives with the elements.' There were purpose and intensity in his face, his chin was aggressive, he wore his masculinity like an armour. Strength, muscle, purpose, power—there was no place in his life for tenderness and romantic love. She felt a shiver run through her right to the very marrow of her bones.

Suddenly his gaze was lifted and came straight to her, and she remembered the expression in his eyes, and the way she had felt earlier on, in the heat of the afternoon, before he had kissed her.

Why had he kissed her? Because he was an adult male and he didn't see many pretty girls? But there was Cass, wasn't there? She was pretty, and Howdie had said he was a bit wrapped up in Cass...

She glanced quickly away from him, not knowing what strange emotion had shaken her.

Nicky found it hard to sleep that night. The spinifex mattress was uneven, but it was springy and comfortable enough, and the silence of

the night, once the men had all rolled themselves up in their swags, was profound.

Through the open flap of her tent she could see the sky and the stars—the Milky Way streaming across the heavens —and down below, the red glow of the dying campfire.

For a long time she lay on her back, her hands behind her head, thinking about Howdie and wondering if he had wanted to make love to her because she was Nicky Reay or simply because he was a love-starved stockman. She hadn't yet come to terms with the fact that Howard at twenty-two was—and had to be—very different from the Howard of six years ago; that the dreams you start dreaming in your early teens have to catch up with reality somewhere along the line, that physical passion is, after all, a part of love.

Her mind flipped disconcertingly to Jarratt, and the way he had kissed her, no holds barred, for no reason at all— except that he had been hovering on the brink of it ever since he met her. She didn't know how true that was, but she thought he'd had a hide to suggest that her compliance persuaded him she'd been expecting it. She hadn't. Not ever.

'You handled it rather well,' he'd told her later on. How had she handled it? She hadn't attempted to evade him, she hadn't pushed him away. Was that handling it well? She only wished she'd had the chance to handle the situation with Howard in her own way, instead of having Jarratt come in and break it up..

Suddenly she felt agonised. Everything had gone wrong—everything. And now, as she began to drift into sleep and her control of her mind and emotions slipped, it was that other man's embrace she re-experienced. She felt again Jarratt's hard mouth against her own, knew the subtle demands of his hard, male, experienced body that had deliberately attempted to arouse her in

some way. And had succeeded, because just thinking of him now made her breath uneven, sent tremors through her body.

She heard herself groan out softly as if asking for help, for reassurance, 'Oh, Howdie—*Howdie--'*

She closed her eyes tightly in a kind of agony, then startled by some faint sound, opened them to see the dark shadow of a man against the sky. She struggled to sit up.

'Howdie, is that you?'

'No, it's Jarratt,' came the drawled reply. 'Did you want anything? I thought I heard you muttering.'

'I must have been dreaming,' Nicky murmured, feeling ashamed. She tried to see him through the darkness, but he was no more than a silhouette. 'I'm perfectly comfortable, thank you. I wish—I wish you'd just leave me alone.'

'Don't worry, it's what I had in mind,' he said dryly. 'So long as you haven't developed a raging fever—your stockman is snoring in his swag, by the way. You'll be able to talk to him tomorrow before I take you back home, I give you my solemn promise.'

She lay back in her sleeping bag again. She didn't—couldn't—answer him, she found his whole attitude totally aggravating. He said goodnight and waited, obviously, for her to answer him, but she bit hard on her lower lip and obstinately said nothing. Her body was tense as she waited for him to go...

When she woke in the morning, the world was red and birds were screeching in the trees. She sat up quickly and scrambled to the opening of the tent to stare out. Unbelievably, the musterers had gone, the cook and the horse tailer were packing up. The campfire was smoking, and Jarratt Buchan, riding a magnificent-looking

stallion, was coming towards her over the Mitchell grass, straight out of the rising sun.

Nicky pulled down the flap of her tent. He hadn't wakened her, despite his promise. Howdie had gone and—oh God! she wanted to see him again. She wanted him to reassure her somehow, to be—to be the Howard she knew. If only he could come back to the homestead instead of being stuck out here—that way, everything would come right. She knew it would.

When she joined Jarratt for breakfast—steak and eggs that he cooked himself over the fire, toast made on the end of a long battered wire fork, billy tea—she taxed him with breaking his promise.

'Why didn't you wake me? You promised--'

His dark eyes looked at her inscrutably, slightly amused.

'You are in a fever, aren't you? But don't get in a flap, Rainbow. You'll see Howard Johnston soon enough, when we follow up the muster later in the day.'

She barely heard the last part of what he said. She was in a state of shock. He had called her Rainbow. He had, she was certain. And yet he couldn't have. She must be imagining things.

He said, 'What's making your eyes as big as saucers?'

She stammered, 'What—what did you call me?'

He looked at her consideringly. 'Well, what *did* I call you?'

'Rainbow,' she said faintly.

'So maybe I did call you that,' he agreed laconically. 'It's a pretty feminine name for a pretty feminine girl—much more to my taste

than Nicky. Your second name's Iris, didn't you tell me—after your mother, who came from Kooriekirra.'

Nicky swallowed and nodded, not understanding why she was so put out, because his explanation was logical enough. But she was confused by those black eyes, and that day at Coochin Brim-brim when she had watched the children in the red sand. And now he was calling her Rainbow, the name Jack had always used. It was—crazy. She wanted to ask him if she—and Jack—had once lived in the stockmen's quarters here.

So why not?

She raised her eyes to his and he looked back at her, and something—something in the tilt of his head, the slight curl upwards at the corners of his decidedly sensual mouth—some expression deep in the warm, unnerving blackness of his eyes, warned her to beware. To ask such a question would be to open wide the book of her life at its most secret pages, and she didn't want him to see. She didn't want him to ask his calculated, analytical questions—'So you lived with the dark children? So your guardian was a rough stockrider? So how the hell did you come to be attending the same school as my sister, and to be here as my guest?'

Of course she was fooling herself to think that way, and she knew it. He would accept her as she was, just as he accepted Cass and Howard, and Shirley Capper—everyone—for what they were. So what was wrong with asking him? Except, instinctively, she knew that confession brought you close to your confessor—and she was frightened of getting too close to Jarry Buchan. Definitely frightened.

'Well, let's get moving,' he said casually into her thoughts. 'Do you want any more tea? No?' He stooped to pick up the billy, and slung the remainder of its contents over what was left of the fire, and then, as he efficiently cleaned up, she got up to help him.

Not much later they were on their way, but by the time they'd inspected various bores where windmills pumped water into tanks, from which it gushed into long troughs for the cattle, it was close on lunchtime before they reached the new camp. Nicky was feeling exhausted both emotionally and physically. The heat was overpowering, and she and Jarratt had talked very little. Everything seemed somehow to have gone flat. Everything that had seemed so simple had now become vastly complicated—her meeting with Howard, her dreams of happy ever after--

'Damn the muster camp!' she thought quite violently. 'And damn Jarratt Buchan too'—who, in her mind, seemed to be responsible for everything that had gone wrong.

Midday dinner was not yet in progress when they reached the camp, though the cook was busy with preparations. Nicky was parched and longed for a cup of tea, but none was forthcoming and she didn't ask for it. There was a mob of cattle on the flat, the stockmen were coming in with more beasts, the dust was rising and it was hideously hot. Jarry parked the utility in the shade and without either explanations or instructions, got out and left her. She saw him cast a practised eye over the horses, select one, saddle it and ride away without sending her a single glance.

For a few minutes she relaxed, leaning back against the hot leather of the seat, then with a sigh she left the utility and wandered down to where big coolabahs marked the line of a waterhole. She thought with longing of the feathery shade, of glinting water reflecting back the blue of the sky, and she began to feel a little more at peace with herself as she walked. This wildness, this isolation, were food for the spirit if you were receptive. They—regenerated. The word flipped into her mind as effortless and as visionary as a silver fish leaping from water, yet if she expressed such a thought aloud, everyone—Guy, Juliet, Jarratt Buchan—would probably think she was off her head. Down in the coolabahs, she heard the white corellas

screeching, and she saw a hawk high up in the heavens, wide wings outspread as it glided on the invisible currents of the air. Nicky wandered slowly on in the shade, no more than half aware of her surroundings. She stooped once to pick a couple of small yellow daisies with spiky leaves, and twirled them mindlessly between finger and thumb. Then presently she began to think of Howard and to wonder if the magic of their relationship would ever come back. She knew, of course, that Guy wouldn't approve of Howard, for a number of reasons. And on consideration, she didn't think Jack would have approved of him either—not for her. Jack had had ambitions for Rainbow Reay. He wouldn't have wanted her to marry a stockman, not even a stockman who had plenty of other ideas.

Jack, Nicky mused, would have wished her to marry someone like Guy Sonder, or even, her thoughts led her on absurdly, Jarratt Buchan.

Now *that* was a mad thing to have thought up!

She began to walk quickly as though to escape from something, letting the daisies fall from her hand. She reached the edge of the tree cover, and from there she saw a little mob of cattle coming in, moving quite briskly over the spinifex. They were great hump-backed Brahmin-based cattle, and though they looked ugly and cumbersome, Nicky knew they had been specially bred to withstand the hard conditions of this land. Shading her eyes with her hand, she discovered that the stockman riding behind was Howdie, and her heart gave an odd little jump that was not entirely of pleasure. She watched him flick his whip, and saw it curl slow and graceful to touch the rump of a beast about to make a break. The creature, head down, lumbered back to the mob, and Nicky felt a flicker of admiration for Howard. He was a good stockman, whether he wanted to pursue a career of that particular type or not.

Red dust rose in a lazy hazy cloud as the mob moved on, then just as the leaders drew about level with where she stood, one of the animals suddenly broke away, and How- die's horse was at once in pursuit, flying after it through the rough tussocky grass. Howard's hat was on the back of his head, he brought his stockwhip into play, the runaway turned and then, unexpectedly—it was unbelievable!—the horse stumbled, its knees buckled--

For a moment the whole scene was like a still from a movie as Howard rose into the air and seemed suspended there. Then Nicky heard the thud right in her heart as he fell sickeningly to the ground.

After a moment during which she seemed completely paralysed, she began to run.

'Howdie—*Howdie!* Are you all right?'

To her relief, she saw that he was struggling to sit up, and then someone else reached him before she did—Jarratt Buchan. He had swung down from his horse and was stooping over Howard as Nicky arrived white-faced, just in time to hear Howard swearing shockingly, his face contorted. Then he caught sight of her and managed a grin.

'Sorry, Nicky. You should've covered your ears. Don't cry, I'm okay.' He was holding his left elbow in the palm of his right hand and his face was twisted with pain. There was nothing for Nicky to do but stand back and wait while Jarratt made a swift examination, then pronounced, 'You've broken your collarbone. Look, I've got bandages in the utility, but before you start walking, we'll get that bone back into position. Now hold on--' His hands were on Howard's shoulders, his knee was on his back between the shoulderblades.

Nicky closed her eyes and heard Howard's grunt of pain. When she looked again, Jarratt was taking off his shirt, and he used it as a rough

clumsy-looking bandage to strap Howard's arm across his chest, the hand high up near his right shoulder.

The three of them walked back to the camp, Jarratt leading his horse, Nicky at Howard's side, silently sympathetic, though he assured her he wasn't in agony.

'Do you know much about first aid, Nicky?' Jarry asked pleasantly, and she shook her head. She did know a little, but it was so elementary it wasn't worth mentioning. She could deal with the little everyday accidents that happened to children, but when it came to a fractured collarbone she was totally ignorant.

'Well, you might learn something today,' Jarratt commented. 'We're going to put a good-sized pad under Howard's armpit, and fix him up with a figure eight bandage. Then we'll see how you feel, Howard. One thing's for sure, though, you're not going to be much use at the muster. Or anywhere else, with one arm strapped across your chest,' he added with a grin.

Nicky was not amused.

CHAPTER SIX

HOWARD came back to the homestead with them in the utility after lunch. Oddly enough, Nicky no longer knew whether she felt pleased that Howard would be around or whether she felt embarrassed about it. She sat between the two men, with Howard on her left and his uninjured arm against hers. She endeavoured not to have any physical contact with Jarratt, but it was difficult, squeezed in as they were, and she had to consider Howard who even if he wasn't in any real pain, must at least be uncomfortable. Jarratt had given him some tablets he carried in the first aid box that apparently went with him everywhere about the property.

When they reached the homestead, Jarratt pulled up to let Nicky out, remarking absentmindedly, 'Go and find Catherine, Nicky, will you? Tell her what's happened and that I want her to come straight over to the bungalow.'

'All right,' she agreed. Howard was trying to get the door open and she leaned across and managed it for herself, then slid out after Howard who, before he got back into the car, gave her a brief smile and told her, 'I'll see you later, Nicky.'

'I'll be over,' she agreed. She asked Jarratt, 'Shall I leave my gear?'

Yes, yes—I'll deal with that. You won't be wanting any of the stuff you've got in the utility tonight.'

That was true. She was feeling very much in need of a shower just now, and she was certainly looking forward to getting out of her dusty jeans into something clean and a bit more feminine.

Inside, Cass had already put away her books and was giving the children an early tea on the side verandah. She looked up with a bright smile of welcome on her placid face when Nicky appeared, and

exclaimed, 'Oh, Nicky, you're back! How did it go? Did you see Howard?'

'Yes. But look, Cass—he had to come back with us. He's broken his collarbone.'

'Oh no!' Cass gasped. 'Oh, Nicky, is he all right?'

'Perfectly,' Nicky reassured her. 'Jarratt's got his arm all strapped up and comfortable, but he wants you to go over to the bungalow straight away. I expect he'll tell you all about it and explain what's to be done and all that. I'll take over here for you. Where's Juliet?'

'She's started another collage. It looks rather good. Well, I'd better go, but I'll be back as soon as I can. You must want to freshen up.'

'It can wait,' said Nicky agreeably. 'Don't hurry.'

As it happened, she didn't see Cass again that night, or Howard either.

She supervised the children as they ate their meal, had them brush their teeth,, and listened to them say their prayers before they got into bed—Cass had taught them that. Then having kissed them goodnight, she switched off the bedroom light and with a sigh of weariness went to look for Juliet. Juliet, she was sure, wouldn't even have thought of dinner, though she must be expecting them back, and though she herself felt too tired and unsettled to be hungry, what with Howdie's accident and one thing and another, she was sure Jarratt would be needing a good meal.

Juliet was in the spare bedroom that Tracy had used as a sewing room. It contained a large cutting-out table as well as a sewing machine, and she had her new collage—a very large one—spread out on the table, and a variety of scraps of different shapes and sizes scattered about. She put her hand to her mouth and stared in dismay

as Nicky switched on the light, which she had neglected to do in her absorption.

'Nicky! You're back already? Whatever time can it be? Did you have a good time?' She tossed back her long blonde? hair and got to her feet. 'You're *covered* in dust! Where's Jarry?'

Patiently Nicky answered her questions and explained about Howard's accident, though it was plain that Juliet wasn't particularly interested in what had happened to Catherine's brother.

'I didn't even know she had a brother working here,' she said with a frown as she followed Nicky through the house in the direction of the kitchen. 'It's quite a family affair, isn't it? What's he like? I hope we're not going to have him hanging about all day expecting to be fed or something. Catherine will have to look after him—she's not as busy as all that. He's her brother. And they can eat in their own place.'

Nicky took a deep breath. Pretty soon Juliet was going to discover that she and Howard Johnston knew each other rather well. She said, 'Look, Juliet, I told you I knew Catherine long ago, and of course I knew Howard too. They were both my friends, and they always will be.'

They had reached the kitchen, and discovered Daisy and Noreen busy peeling vegetables, and grilling steak ready on the table. Nicky sighed with relief and presumed she had Cass to thank for this.

Juliet said with a little smile, 'You're sweet, Nicky, so terribly loyal—to me too. You're a far better person than I am. I agree Catherine's quite a nice girl, but all the same--' She spread her hands and gave a little shrug, implying, Nicky supposed, that 'nursemaids' and stockmen weren't the sort of people one mixed with socially. Nothing more was said, and she busied herself in the kitchen feeling more than slightly troubled. It looked like being a rather tricky

situation. She wondered as she put on the vegetables to cook and seasoned the steaks, and Juliet laid the table, exactly what was going on over at the Johnstons' bungalow, and if all her own past was coming out. And if it did, what of it? Except that Juliet, if it was passed on to her, would probably be a bit cool to her.

At that moment Juliet came into the kitchen to ask, 'Where's Jarry? I'd like to know if I'm expected to lay a place at the table for the stockman. I shouldn't be surprised. Sometimes it seems my brother does have some rather unorthodox ideas. I mean, Lewis Trent is definitely superior, and a governess is—acceptable, but a stockman—! Oh, sorry—they're your friends, I forgot.'

Nicky bit her lip and said nothing. She somehow didn't think Howard would be sitting at the dinner table with them.

And neither he was. In fact neither Cass nor Howard joined them, and over dinner Jarratt, quite deliberately she was sure, said very little about the injured stockman. It seemed he didn't want to pander to her interest in Howdie. Well, never mind, she thought, she would go over to the bungalow after dinner and find out for herself how Howard was feeling. She intended to have an early night, but she would certainly do that first, and then before she went to bed she would have the shower she was longing for—and wash her hair too. She had found time only for a quick wash and a brush up, and a change of clothing, before dinner.

Juliet had gone into the sitting room to play some records and Nicky was about to leave the dining room when Jarratt put a hand on her arm.

'By the way, Nicky, if you're thinking of going over to the Johnstons' bungalow, you'd better forget it. Howard was feeling a bit of a reaction and I've sedated him, and Catherine is trying to catch up on an essay she's been having trouble with. So leave it.'

She raised her head and saw the little mocking smile that lifted just slightly the corners of his mouth, and suddenly she was sure he had seen her struggling with Howard— heard her plead, 'Don't!' It was a hateful feeling, and she turned away without saying anything.

She didn't go to the bungalow. She went to her room.

It was not until morning that she knew he had fooled her. Because when she rose early, anxious to see Howard and learn how he was feeling, he had gone.

Cass was making breakfast for the little girls, and when Nicky enquired after Howard, she said, 'He went out like a light, *t* could hardly wake him this morning to be ready for Jarry.'

Nicky stared at her. 'What on earth are you talking about, Cass? Surely Jarry hasn't taken Howdie back to the muster camp--'

'Of course not!' Cass widened her eyes. 'I thought Jarry would have told you. He decided to take him to Alice. We agreed it would be a good idea for Howdie to see the doctor.'

'Oh.' Nicky fought back the anger that was rising in her. Jarratt had deliberately not told her that, as though it were none of her business. She said controlledly, 'You should have gone along too, Cass. Juliet and I could have minded the children.'

'I can't take time off like that,' said Cass cheerfully.

The two little girls came in, their faces shining, Medora tugging a comb through her fair curls. Cass reached down as though it were second nature to help her. 'I thought you might have liked to go, but Jarry didn't seem to want to take anyone along, and I didn't like to suggest it. I mean, after all, I'm only employed here, and you're Juliet's guest. Besides, I didn't know if you'd said anything about—well, about you and Howdie.'

Nicky bit her lip. 'Jarry knows we were friends when we were children. But, Cass, there's nothing else to say yet, is there? What—what did Howdie say about me last night?'

'Oh,' Cass said with a smile, 'he said how pretty you are and that money hasn't made you big-headed. And Nicky,' she added apologetically, 'I know you'll be disappointed, but Howdie decided this morning that he'd stay in Alice for a while.'

'What?' Nicky stared at her. Just like that—the moment they met again! But Howard hadn't made that decision, she was positive. Jarratt Buchan had made it for him. It was just the kind of thing he would do.

'He'll be back,' Cass said reassuringly. 'Actually he wants to look around for another job—and I can guess why. Being the wife of a stockman out here isn't very attractive—not to the sort of girl he's interested in,' she added significantly.

Nicky scarcely listened, she was so furiously angry. And in fact she was thinking more about Jarratt than about the fact that she wasn't after all going to see much of Howard. She remembered what Jarratt had said about being responsible for her—how he had come after her the night she had walked away with Howard. As well, he had been hanging around near her tent close enough to hear her when she moaned a little. He certainly had a suspicious mind, she reflected bitterly, and she refrained from reminding herself that Howard had proved more difficult to handle than she had expected.

So now he was making sure he wasn't bothered by his responsibility, and she wondered how long he intended leaving Howard cooling his heels in Alice Springs, with no means of coming back to Coochin Brim-brim. A few days would be ample time to look around for work in a town of that size.

It was insufferably interfering on Jarratt's part, particularly when she and Howard had been childhood friends, and ^s she felt an urge to tell him exactly what she thought of him. She would do exactly that, she decided, the moment he came home.

He wasn't back till after midnight.

Nicky was in bed, but she wasn't asleep. She had been lying in bed trying to fool herself that she was reading, but all the time she was thinking of Jarratt and how highhandedly he had acted—and how meanly. How officious he Was, interfering in her private life! She burned to defeat him somehow, and certainly she would tell him what she thought of him, even if he was her host.

She had discarded her book and switched off her light when she heard his car, and then a few minutes later his footsteps, not loud but very decisive on the floorboards of the verandah. She reached for the light switch and slipped out of bed. In a few short moments she had pulled on a blue shirt and dragged a pair of jeans on over her pyjama pants. She looked quickly in the mirror, ran a comb through her hair and saw the flash of her own angry blue eyes as she departed to run Jarratt Buchan to earth.

He was in the kitchen. He had pulled off his tie and unbuttoned his shirt, and he was standing in the middle of the room, his head well back as he drank down a glass of beer. Nicky paused in the doorway momentarily, strangely arrested by the sight of this tall broad-shouldered man with the dark hairy chest. Drinking beer.

He emptied the glass and reached for the bottle on the table, stopping with his hand in mid-air as he caught sight of her. She was shocked, now she could see his face, at how tired he looked—tired and haggard, and very much in need of a shave. The absurd thought entered her mind that she must have been mad to think Jack would

have liked her to marry a man like Jarratt Buchan. He was rough—impossible--

'Haven't you got yourself to bed yet?'

As on other occasions, the moment she heard that cultured, almost murmurous voice, she was confounded. She blinked and swallowed hard before she could answer him. Why did he have to be so disconcerting?

'I couldn't sleep.' She added accusingly, 'Did you bring Howard back with you?'

He poured the rest of the beer into his glass while she was speaking, then raised it to his lips, drank half of it down, and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. His eyes looked black and there were dark shadows round them, almost as dark as the stubble of hair on his upper lip and along his jawline.

'No, I did not. Haven't you talked to Catherine?' He looked at her starkly, unreadably. 'Howard slept on it and decided he might as well stay in Alice a while.'

'Slept on *what*?' she flared. 'The—the slating you gave him last evening after I got out of the car?'

'My dear Nichola,' he drawled, 'I'm not in the habit of giving my stockmen a slating over personal matters. I suppose that's what's in your mind. Howard Johnston has human instincts that it's only natural for him to follow. If anyone deserves a slating, it's you.'

She gritted her teeth. 'How long is he going to be away?'

He looked at her with an intensity that made her shrivel up. 'That's his business, isn't it? He'll be useless to me as a stockman for several weeks, so for the present I'm not greatly concerned.'

'You only think of yourself, don't you?' she accused. 'Juliet has to give up everything and come and stay here just for *your* benefit--'

He drank the rest of his beer in an unconcerned way, and now his eyes glinted with a hard amusement. 'That's right,' he agreed. 'And if it's of any interest to you, I visited Tracy in hospital today, and it seems likely that Juliet will have to stay here for quite some little while yet.'

'Why should she?' Nicky argued, 'if she doesn't want to. You could manage perfectly well with Lena if you wanted to.'

The glint in his eyes grew harder. 'Are you trying to run my life?' She didn't answer and he moved to the sink to rinse his glass. 'If I say Juliet's to stay, then she's to stay. At least it will prevent her from getting round her mother and racing off to land herself in some impossible predicament in France. That's how I see it, and I don't want an argument. As for you--'

'You can't order *me* about,' she said quickly.

'You took the words right out of my mouth,' he agreed dryly. 'So when would you like to go home? You have only to say the word. I dare say I'll adapt to life without your cooking, pleasant though I've found it.'

Her throat was dry as she stared back at him, her heart pounding. She knew she didn't want to leave. Of course she could go to Alice, to Howard. Yet she discarded that thought without even looking at it properly, and told him shakily, 'I—I don't have a home. I'd have to check I could stay with—friends--'

He looked amused. 'Don't worry, I won't push you out. You're welcome to stay here as long as you like.' A little smile lifted the corners of his wide mouth and he put out his hand and touched her hair briefly. She felt a little shock go through her and stepped quickly away, and his smile vanished.

'Was there anything else you wanted, now you know I've left your childhood love in Alice?'

'No.' She met his eyes and after a second her glance fell. She asked indistinctly, 'Why are you so set on keeping me and Howard apart?'

He looked surprised. 'I'm not set on it. Howard made his own decision—the right one, to my mind. He'd be wasting his time hanging round here with his arm bandaged up. He has ideas of finding himself a new job, I understand. He doesn't intend to spend the rest of his life rounding up cattle that don't belong to him. He's ambitious—like his sister—but a little slow in finding his direction. So don't pile all the blame on me, Rainbow,' he concluded. His voice unsettled her with its change to gentleness, and his use of that name did strange things to her heart. 'You can't go back in time, you know. All that's past is past—yet it's part of the sum that totals up to the person you are, and even the person you will become. It's better left unspoiled, intact, in its rightful place. You're young—your discoveries, your real discoveries, are ahead of you. You won't find them in your childhood.'

She listened and a number of things went through her mind—those days when she had played with the aboriginal children in the red sand; the years in Alice with Cass and Howdie. Boarding school and her dreams of love—of Howard. The last few months when Jack had been dying and had told her things she'd never known. It all added up mysteriously to her—to Nichola Iris Reay. To—to Rainbow. And now she was here at Coochin Brim-brim, alone with Jarratt Buchan in the small hours of the morning, in a sleeping house in the middle of the Never-Never.

She shivered slightly. Perhaps he was right, perhaps her real discoveries were still ahead of her. She felt terribly aware of him. He was so positive, so self-assured. The crazy thing was that she had left her bed to accuse him, and now--She sighed. He had defeated her.

She didn't have a hope of asserting herself against a man like Jarratt Buchan. Not when he called her Rainbow in that fraught-with-meaning way. Not when he looked at her the way he was doing--

Suddenly she turned her back on him and fled through the dark house to her bedroom, without even wishing him goodnight.

For several days after that everything—outwardly—went on just as it had before she had gone to the muster with Jarratt. Yet for Nicky, something shattering had happened —her longed-for meeting with Howard. And it had been shattering because it had been so different from anything she had ever imagined. *Howard* was so different. Something fragile had vanished as though it had never been.

She and Cass and Juliet continued to co-exist amiably enough, each of them for the greater part of the time going their separate ways, occupying themselves with their individual tasks and activities. For Nicky, there was the garden to be watered and weeded, flowers to be picked and arranged. And there was the evening meal to prepare. Sometimes during the afternoons while Cass was doing her lessons, she took over the children for a short while, sometimes she swam or went for a ride. Jarratt, it seemed to her, was even less in evidence than he had ever been, and though she had made up her mind to ask him when he would be going to Alice to fetch Howdie back, she never did it.

One searingly hot day when the sun stood out in the burnished sky like a vermillion moon, the three girls with the children walked over to the waterhole for a swim.

'Jarry should have given me the use of a car,' Juliet complained, 'but he's got it into his head that I'm not to be trusted behind a steering wheel. As if anything could happen in this vacuum!'

They walked slowly, the brims of their cotton hats flapping in the heat. They wore shirts over their swimwear and all of them gasped with relief when they reached the water-hole. Marcie-Ann and Medora raced down the bank, eager to plunge into the clear pale green water, so coolly shaded by the coolabahs and ghost gums.

When Nicky had been in the water so long that the skin on her fingers was beginning to crinkle, she decided it was time Jo come out. She stood on the bank to dry, tossing back her hair that was clinging to her neck and cheeks in curling tendrils, and literally watching the water evaporate from her pale coral-coloured bikini. The others were still in the water. Juliet, her long blonde hair pinned up on top of her head, her eyes protected by big sunglasses, sat on a rock in the water near the bank. She was submerged almost to chin level, and she was reading a magazine which was beginning to look rather bedraggled, and she was not in the slightest bit interested in what anyone else was doing. Cass, on the other hand, gave all her attention to the children, despite the fact that both of them were expert swimmers. Just now she stood waist-deep in water watching them build an underwater city out of stones, in the clear shallows near a little sandy beach in the curve of the bank. She wore a decorous one-piece swimsuit of faded green that didn't even pretend to glamorise her slightly plump figure, and her long brown hair hung down in rats' tails as she watched the two little girls busily building.

Nicky had fallen into a dream and was startled almost out of her skin when a deep blue shadow moved on the ground beside her, and Jarratt was there.

'I thought I'd find you all here,' he remarked, and she turned her head swiftly, feeling the colour creep up under her skin. His dark eyes travelled briefly over her figure in the revealing bikini, then came to rest quizzically on her face. 'What sort of a swimmer are you?'

'Average,' she said, aware that her heart was beating fast.

He pulled off his shirt and tossed it on the ground. He wore navy and white striped swim trunks that made his hips look lean and narrow in comparison with the breadth of his tanned shoulders, and there were dark hairs on his legs that matched those on his chest.

'Are you coming in again?' he asked her. She hesitated and a shower of water glittered in the air between them. Marcie-Ann had discovered Jarratt's presence and was throwing water to attract his attention. Immediately he forgot Nicky and strode down the bank, and in a few seconds he was with Cass, and sharing her interest in the underwater city. Juliet had done no more than raise a hand to acknowledge her brother's presence, though she had by now abandoned her magazine. Nicky stayed exactly where shewas, and she stared down at the water as she had been doing, but everything was different. Her body, her mind, were in a fever, and she couldn't keep her eyes off Jarratt, whose white teeth were now flashing as he laughed at something Medora said to him.

Presently, he and Cass took the children into the deeper water, Cass towing Marcie-Ann along, and Jarry with little Medora riding on his back, her small brown arms wound around his neck, her childish voice raised as she uttered excited squeals. Nicky was forgotten, and she watched half- smiling yet with a feeling of edgy tension that was disquieting. Jarratt had asked her if she was coming in again, but now, quite obviously, he didn't care one way or the other. He could have waited for her, she thought, but he hadn't, and now she found it literally impossible to go and join him and Cass. She saw Jarratt say something to Cass, and Cass raised her head and smiled at him, and something inside Nicky was suddenly still.

Cass was plumpish, placid, kind. There had never been anything remarkable or dazzling about her, yet in that moment it struck home to Nicky that there was a very womanly dignity and even beauty in her smooth, suntanned face. Loving, romantic, warm-hearted Cass. Suddenly Nicky saw her as Jarratt must see her, and she knew that

Howdie could easily be right in believing he was attracted to Cass. It would be a wonder if he wasn't, seeing her every day as he did...

Nicky moved away rather slowly and found her shirt. She had pulled it on when the children came splashing up the bank and ran to join her. In the waterhole, Cass and Jarratt were wading along by the bank, their heads bent, deep in conversation. What were they talking about? Cass's lessons? Howard? Or was it something far more intimate and personal that absorbed them?

'What business is it of mine?' Nicky asked herself in annoyance. All the same, it would be great for Cass. 'If Jarratt loves her,' she added mentally.

So what was love?

What *was* love?

She stopped to help Medora with her sandals, making a pretence of listening to the child's chatter, but she felt cold inside. She thought in a kind of panic of Howdie, and of that old familiar warm glow that used to come over her when he was in her mind. It didn't come now. It hadn't come for quite a while. She was beginning to suspect that when it came to the point, she didn't know what love was. She didn't know the first thing about it. Her discoveries in that direction were certainly all ahead of her. Was that what Jarratt had been talking about? Love?

'Catherine says we can go home and ask Lena for a glass of milk,' Marcie-Ann said. 'Are you coming, Nicky?'

'Yes—yes, I think I'll come too,' said Nicky. 'I've had enough swimming for one day.' She was pulling on her cotton hat when Juliet called out, 'Hang on, Nicky, I'm coming too!'

A few minutes later the children were skipping, hand in hand, ahead of her and Juliet through the dried-out-looking grasses. It was still

hot, but the sun was low in the sky now and the fierceness had gone out of the day. Juliet, her shirt slung round her shoulders, asked Nicky in a low voice, 'What do you think Jarry and Catherine are talking about, back there in the waterhole? I wish I'd had the hide to go and make it a threesome, but I suppose it wouldn't have been worth the effort. If Jarry didn't want me around he'd have told me, and I loathe being bossed around in front of—well, in front of other people.'

Nicky laughed carelessly. 'I don't think he'd have minded your being there. They're probably discussing Cass's lessons or something.'

'Something,' said Juliet emphatically. 'It might start with lessons, but that girl is definitely out to win my brother. It was she who sent the children out of the water—I heard her distinctly. Goodness knows, I wish he would get married—that would let me out, and poor old Tracy too. But I certainly wouldn't choose Catherine Johnston as a sister-in-law. That would be just a little bit hard to take. Next thing, we'd have her brother coming to stay with us in Adelaide, and from what I've seen of stockmen, I hardly think that would go down well with any of our friends. Oh, I know Catherine was a friend of yours, but that was when you were children, and children don't discriminate. It's later on you learn you simply must have some standards.'

With difficulty Nicky held her tongue—mainly because she was afraid of what she would say if she did speak. She could destroy for ever her friendship with Juliet if she told her she was a snob, and that if she faced up to facts, she would know that Catherine Johnston was worth ten of her—and ten of Nicky too—in every possible way. Telling someone that was something you just didn't do when you were a guest.

She walked on breathing deeply and evenly, reminding herself that Juliet couldn't help having these attitudes. They had obviously been taught to her by her mother. Juliet had been born to comfort, to riches, to a sense of superiority over those less fortunate. As for Nicky

herself, she was a fraud, and becoming increasingly and uncomfortably aware of it. And that was because she had obeyed Jack's injunctions to keep quiet when she went to school in Adelaide. She wished now that she hadn't kept quiet, that she had been honest and open. Children don't discriminate, Juliet had just said that herself. She'd have been accepted. All the same, she rather thought she wouldn't have been here now, a guest at Coochin Brim-brim—a girl whose guardian had lived in a dugout under the ground, whose father had been a mate of that rough man.

She was certainly, when she came to think of it, here under false pretences. And she had to say something on Cass's behalf.

She said slowly into the silence that had fallen between them, 'I think if two people love each other, then that's all „that really matters. And—and I don't think Howard would turn up and expect to stay with you in Adelaide. He's just not the type to push in where he's not wanted, or to—to bludge on anyone. Even if he *is* only a stockman,' she concluded a little hotly.

'Loyal old Nicky,' Juliet said good-naturedly. 'You're a lot more tolerant than I am. But I don't think for a moment that Jarry is in love with that girl. If he ever did rush off and marry someone like that—someone beneath him—it would be because Tracy had jacked up or something, and he was pushed into a corner and just had to get married to the most likely person around. And that's one of the big disadvantages of living in the Never-Never—the choice is so limited, there are pitifully few people one could possibly marry. So let's hope he never is pushed into a corner. Tracy will come back, she likes the money as much as I do, and Jarry never hesitates when it comes to twisting our arms. Frankly, I should hate to be Tracy. I couldn't bear to live here, could you?'

'I like the outback,' said Nicky, knowing she sounded perverse, but meaning it. 'Probably because I lived in the Centre as a child,' she added.

'All the same, you'll be as pleased as I shall be to get back to Adelaide and civilisation,' Juliet said knowingly, and rather weakly Nicky didn't pursue the subject.

Cass and Jarratt didn't get home for quite some time. By then, Nicky was in the kitchen preparing the accompaniments to the peppered steaks she was going to serve for dinner. She was decorating a salad platter with sprigs of fresh mint when Jarratt, just showered and wearing bamboo coloured cotton pants and a Vandyke brown voile shirt, put in an appearance.

'Mail day,' he informed her. 'Two letters for you, Nicky. I'm afraid I've made you wait for them—I didn't take them over to the waterhole.'

For some reason Nicky thought instantly of Howard, and dried her hands quickly on the kitchen towel so that she could take the letters he handed her. But when she looked at the envelopes, she saw one letter was from San Francisco—from Guy—and the other one was from Claudia Mallard, in Adelaide.

'Let me know when your guardian's coming for you, won't you?' Jarratt said.

'Yes, of course,' she said, colouring, 'I suppose you'll be glad to be relieved of your responsibility.'

He smiled slightly, but neither confirmed nor denied, and stood watching her as she slipped the two letters into the pocket of the apron she was wearing, and returned to the salad.

His lips twisted wryly. 'First things first, is that it? I'm flattered. You must know how hungry I am ... That looks pretty, but I hope there are steaks too.'

'Yes,' she said briefly, 'pepper steaks.'

'Fine. Do you like cooking, Rainbow?' She felt her nerves jump at his use of that name, but he went on leaning indolently against the wall, and looked at her sleepily and maddeningly from half-closed eyes. 'Or do you do it all for love of me?' he asked.

'What do you think?' she retorted. "I do it to help Juliet out.'

'Thus defeating my foul purpose in bringing my sister here. Ah well, the man who marries her will have to suffer while she learns to cook.'

'I don't think he'll suffer all that much,' said Nicky practically. 'And now if you don't mind, I'd like to get on with the dinner.'

She didn't read her letters till after they had eaten. Coffee had been made, and Cass had brought in a rough copy of some essay she'd written for Jarratt's criticism. The children, who found it too hot to sleep, were on the verandah in their pyjamas, drinking lemon squash as they lay on their stomachs on the cool wooden floor, and Juliet was determinedly playing records despite Cass.

Nicky sat a little apart and read her letters, starting with Guy's. His main news was that he was prolonging his visit to the States, and she was conscious of a feeling of relief. With no date set for his return to Australia, it looked as if she could count on staying here for a little while yet at least:

Claudia's letter upset her—or at least, it made her blood boil. It assumed Guy's intentions towards Nicky to be far more specific than she had ever taken them to be, but Claudia didn't attempt to conceal the fact that she considered Nicky a nonentity. 'It's time Guy married,

'of course,' she wrote. 'I suggest, since he is prolonging his absence, that you come back to Adelaide immediately. We shall then be able to concentrate on making you more presentable, despite your youth and your rather dubious background. You may not be aware of it, but you're sadly lacking in that subtle aura a girl of breeding acquires at home. It's a blessing at least that Jack Lane has gone, and we shan't have that embarrassment to explain away when we begin making wedding plans.'

Wedding plans! Did Claudia take it for granted Nicky would say yes if Guy asked her to marry him? Because she wouldn't—she was not even the slightest bit in love with him. She felt so incensed by Claudia's lack of consideration, her tactlessness, that she didn't want to read any more. Moreover, she felt deeply hurt. It appeared that all Claudia's kindnesses to her in Adelaide—helping her to choose clothes, introducing her to 'nice' people, advising her about the 'right' thing to do—they had all been designed to remedy the—the deficiencies of a girl who lacked breeding. As for her remark about Jack, that was in the worst possible taste.

'Not pleased with your letters?' Jarratt's voice enquired dryly, and Nicky swiftly wiped the frown from her face. Jarratt stood looking down at her as she thrust the pages of the letter back into their envelope. Then he reached out and pulled up one of the rattan chairs for himself, and sat down, stretching his long legs out in front of him. Nicky looked around her uneasily. Juliet had disappeared, and so had Cass. And the children. She and Jarratt were alone. From the darkness outside she heard the sad call of a mopoke, a sound she remembered from her earliest years, a sound she loved—evocative, nostalgic, oddly comforting. It belonged way back in the pre-Alice Springs days, to a time that was so vague she couldn't really remember it at all. And that smell of dust in the air—that was almost as evocative. Her nostrils dilated slightly.

'Dust,' said Jarratt briefly. 'We're going to have rain to lay it. Tonight ... Well, are you going to tell me what's new?'

In her letters, he meant, and she shrugged indifferently.

'My letters aren't all that interesting—to you.' She added deliberately, 'I thought I might have heard from Howard.'

'Ah yes.' His expression changed subtly, hardened. 'I've been hearing about your youthful amourette from Catherine. She gave it a really big wrap up—but I guess she's a romantic.' His eyes were intent on her, and she felt her spine prickle. 'Are you still interested in updating it? I wouldn't blame Howard for giving it a go, of course—you've got more than good looks going for you.'

Nicky bit her Up. He meant money, she realised, and it was a hateful thing to say, because Howard would never lean on a woman, and she'd said as much already to Juliet. But there was no point in getting into an argument with Jarratt about it—he'd have her tied up in knots in a moment, and what he thought didn't really matter one iota to her.

She said chillingly, 'I gather you and Cass were talking about me down at the waterhole.'

'Yes. Weren't your ears burning?' he countered maddeningly. His attention returned to her mail. 'Who was your other letter from?'

'My other letter?'

'One was from Guy Sonder,' he said reasonably. 'Who's Mrs Claudia Mallard? That's what I'm wondering.'

The cheek of the man—examining her letters!

'I thought you already knew,' she said icily. 'She's Guy's sister.'

She added nothing to that, though he waited. If he wanted to know why Claudia had written, what she had said, he was right out of luck. And later on she was going to tear that letter into tiny bits.

He said, 'You don't give much away, do you? One would think' you have some guilty secret.'

She looked up and met his eyes. He was smiling in a speculative way that was more impersonal than unfriendly, and she thought how he had looked in the water this afternoon -when he and Cass had been fooling about. He didn't look at her the way he had looked at Cass. Yet even so, as she met his glance, something happened to her—the same sort of thing that was always happening. She had always found the expression deep in his eyes disturbing. It affected her oddly—did something to her metabolism. Those almost black eyes seemed to say, 'You are a woman and I am aware of it.' Worse still, they made *her* aware of it. That was why this afternoon beside the clear green water under the coolabah trees she had been—shaken. Her heart had thumped the way it was doing now. She didn't like being looked at that way. *Tyger, tyger, burning bright--*

'Well?' he drawled out. 'You're not going to deny it?'

'Deny what?' she stammered.

'That you have a guilty secret—something to hide.'

Something to hide—could he read her thoughts? She was aware of slight panic, but—of course, he was talking about her refusal to tell him what was in her letters. She moved quickly and stood up. Her feet were bare because she had slipped off her sandals in the heat. 'I don't have any guilty secrets. I'm just not the sort of person who—who blabs out everything to anybody.'

He was on his feet too, and he seemed immensely taller than she.

'Am I—anybody, Rainbow?' He put his hand on her arm and her heart began to thud. Her letters slipped on to the floor. Now, as they stood facing each other, above the soft light from the table lamp, her glance settled for some reason on his mouth. His lips were parted slightly as though he were going to say something more, but he didn't. He simply pulled her close, so that her cheek was against the warmth of his chest. She could feel the beat of his blood, feel his body's heat through the soft cotton voile of his shirt. One of his hands slid up under her shirt and rested against her bare back, and his lips were on her hair. She felt herself tremble. Her mind had completely emptied—she was like the cup of a flower waiting to receive the dew--

Then she heard someone coming, and he released her and was stooping to pick up the letters she had dropped when Cass appeared. Cass, she thought shaken. He wouldn't want Cass to see him with Nicky in his arms.

'Oh, Jarry,' said Cass blithely, 'I've made that alteration you suggested. Is it too late for you to check it over? I want to be done with it.'

'Right! Let's have it—I'll take a look at it now,' he said, not briskly, not as if he minded the interruption in the least.

Cass had a sort of inky look about her. She looked like a student, Nicky thought. Her hair was ruffled as though she had been running her fingers through it, and there was a wistful, half-dreaming smile on her lips and in her wide eyes. Nicky felt jolted. Cass was so vulnerable, somehow. Jarratt sat down on the cane couch and she sat down with him, very close, looking over his shoulder trustfully as he read what she had written.

Quietly, unobtrusively, Nicky picked up the sandals she had discarded and went to her room. She felt full of nerves, she felt guilty that she had let Jarratt hold her like that, guilty that her heart had

pounded. She had no idea what would have happened if Cass hadn't come with her school- books—with her request that Jarratt check over her work. Nicky had forgotten Howard, and the start of the conversation. She could only think of Jarratt, and the way he had called her Rainbow. That had been her undoing, that had led her on naturally into an elusive pleasure, half physical, half emotional, intensified by his holding her so close to him.

As she stood barefoot in her room, the rain that Jarratt had forecast began to fall, hard and heavy on the iron roof. She stared across at the mirror, but instead of herself she saw Jarratt's face. She envied Cass. Yes, she knew she would give anything to live here, to come to Jarratt as Cass did with her lessons, to lean over his shoulder, to listen to his voice--

When had it happened?

Nicky turned away from the mirror and got ready for bed, and when she had switched off the light she lay in the dark for a long time, kept awake by the sound of the rain. Yet if she were honest, she knew it was not the rain that mads her wakeful, it was her own thoughts.

If Cass had not come...

CHAPTER SEVEN

NICKY slept at last, and had one of her recurring dreams.

She was on a train, and through the window she saw Cass and Howard, as they used to be, on the platform. She waved to them and they waved back, then, as the train began to move, she ran to the door in a sudden panic and jumped out, almost falling. When she regained her balance, Cass and Howdie were running away from her. Nicky ran too, but however fast she ran, they ran faster, and she knew with despair that she would never catch up with them. She sobbed out, 'Wait for me—please wait for me!' but they didn't hear—they never did. She was barefooted and wearing the checked cotton dress that she used to wear to school in Alice Springs, and she could see clearly the three-cornered tear in the skirt that she had mended herself, rather clumsily.

Then suddenly, as she was crying out 'Howdie—Cass!' it wasn't those two she was pursuing after all. They had vanished, and it was Jarratt Buchan who suddenly turned to face her and block her way. 'So this is what you've been hiding from me,' he accused. 'How dare you come here with my sister, pretending to be what you aren't?' As he spoke, he began to shake her hard, until she gasped out, 'Don't— please don't--'

But the shaking went on until she woke, sobbing, her cheeks wet with tears. To find the bedside lamp was on and Jarratt, in a pair of dark blue shorts, was leaning over the bed and shaking her.

'Wake up—wake up, Rainbow. You're having a nightmare.'

To her horror, she went on weeping, and he reached out and pulled her hard against his muscular midriff.

'Now shut *up*. You've been dreaming, that's all. Tell me about it—that's the way to exorcise it. Come on, tell me--'

'They wouldn't wait—they ran away—I was all by myself—and then--'

She stopped and he said, 'You're not by yourself any more. I'm here, see? I'm with you—you're safe with me, so wipe your eyes and stop crying all over my diaphragm.' He used an edge of the sheet to wipe her wet cheeks, and she knew her tears were ridiculous because they were over a dream. She struggled away from him, embarrassed at what she had dreamed and embarrassed still more at the way she had been clinging to him.

'I'm sorry. I'm all right now. It was just a stupid dream. I didn't mean to wake you.'

'Well, I know that,' he said dryly, and added, 'Who was it who wouldn't wait?'

'Cass—Howard--' she murmured.

'Good God! So you're crying over Howard Johnston.' He had put her right away from him, and she stared at him helplessly, intensely aware of the savage, almost ugly look that had come over his face. He moved to the end of the bed and looked at her through narrowed eyes. 'What do you want? For me to bring him back?'

Nicky hugged her knees to her and shivered, conscious now of her mussed-up hair and her tear-stained face, and the fact that half the buttons on her pyjama top were undone. Lashes lowered, she fastened them with shaking hands. She was utterly shocked, yet excited too, at the dark male look of him as he sat bare-chested on the end of her bed, eyeing her inimically.

She said unsteadily, 'I don't want you to do anything. You've interfered enough--'

'How am I expected to take that? I've interfered once and once only, and if you ask me, it was a kindness I did you. Unless you intended to allow yourself to be seduced that night just for old times' sake.' He got up abruptly, staring at her scarlet face mercilessly. 'I'm not interfering. Get that out of your mind. Make your discoveries your own way—do what you like. I don't want to be *in loco parentis* to you—God forbid. I take some comfort, however, from the fact that Howard's been winged, and when he comes back he won't be such a menace. Well, I'll leave you to your dreams, Rainbow.'

'Don't call me that,' she said fiercely, upset by his attitude.

'Why not?' His eyes were dark and diabolical. 'Is it Howard's name for you? Does he call you that?'

She was somehow shocked. 'No one does,' she said, and added under her breath, 'now.'

'Well then, I do. It's a name that suits you.' He moved abruptly to the head of the bed, and she stiffened. But it was only to flick off the light. 'Goodnight,' he said into the darkness, and through the rain Nicky heard the sound of his bare feet as he left the room.

She lay quivering, her mind obsessed by his image, by his voice. No matter how he derided her, it had happened.

When? she asked herself, though when didn't matter. Howard belonged well and truly in the past now. Even her dream—her nightmare—had become updated, because Jarratt Buchan had intruded into it. Catching her out—discovering her guilty secrets.

She woke in the morning nervy and on edge, remembering immediately what had happened during the night. The rain had gone, the garden was steaming, drifts of white vapour moved across the red earth as the sun burned down, fiercely hot already. As she dressed, she hoped no one had seen the light in her room or the man sitting on

the side of her bed holding her against his half-naked body. What would Cass think? And—oh God!—the thought of Cass made her wonder if Jarratt had ever gone to comfort *her* in the night, held *her* in his arms.

She was thankful when she went out to breakfast to find he had gone.

The children had eaten, and she could hear Cass talking to them in the garden where she was probably giving them a nature study talk after the rain. Not to have to face Cass yet was somehow a relief too. All Nicky wanted was a strong cup of coffee and a piece of toast, and when she went to the kitchen for it, Lena was there singing happily. She took her breakfast on to the verandah, and her nerves had settled somewhat when Juliet appeared, wearing the pale green silk jumpsuit she sometimes wore first thing in the mornings. She too had settled for coffee, and she too had something on her mind, so if Nicky was looking pale and distraught she wasn't aware of it. She settled in one of the big rattan armchairs, her legs curled up under her, a brooding look on her face. Nicky supposed she was preoccupied with thoughts of her collage, until she suddenly turned to her and spoke.

'Nicky, I had a letter from Marc yesterday. He's broken off with that girl his parents were pressuring him into marrying. It's over—finished. He's asked me to come back to France.'

Nicky forced herself to give Juliet her full attention. The other girl's eyes were bright with determination now, and it flashed through her mind, 'We'll be leaving here—Juliet's going to refuse to stay on.' She asked, 'Will you go to France?'

Juliet hunched her shoulders. 'How can I? Trouble is, I don't have the money for my fare, and Jarratt's refused point blank to have any part in it. I talked to him last night when I finally managed to get rid of Catherine and her damned books—you'd gone off to bed. He says if Marc's serious about me, then he can come out to Australia. Full stop.'

The old sexist idea that the woman should be passive. Even the fact that Marc's actually asked me to go doesn't interest him one little bit.'

'Does Marc want you to marry him?'

'Of course!' Juliet widened her grey-green eyes. 'We're madly in love with each other. It happened the moment we met. We'd probably have been married by now if Jarry hadn't interfered and made my mother bring me home. Marc wanted me to stay, he said he was going to ask Marie-Laure to release him from a promise that was really his parents', not his. But my mother got in a tizz and wrote and told Jarry all about it. Threats flew up from the southern hemisphere and she was having such hysterics I was too embarrassed to do anything but let myself be dragged off. Next thing, as you know, I was summoned here, to be kept under observation. Jarry's behaved like a pig. But he's not going to order my life for ever.'

Nicky listened with mixed feelings. She had had no idea that the French affair was so serious, and was a little inclined to wonder if Marc's charms hadn't faded somewhat—until this letter came. She agreed with Juliet that Jarry was interfering, she had personal experience of that—but he was looking after his sister's interests, she supposed, and she even thought it was reasonable to expect Marc to come to Australia if he was serious about Juliet.

'What will you do?' she asked Juliet.

'I'll lie low,' Juliet said promptly. 'Let Jarry think I'm bowing to the inevitable. But when I get back to Adelaide, I'm going to try to talk my mother into lending me some money, on the strength of Marc's letter. If she won't, I'll get it somewhere else.' She looked at Nicky speculatively. 'Would you lend me the money for my fare, Nicky? You'd get it back, I promise.'

'I'd have to ask Guy,' Nicky said a little uncomfortably. 'My finances are all in his hands.'

'Yes, I remember you told me that before. What are the chances, then? What's he like? Old? Middle-aged? Married? Stuffy?'

'None of those,' Nicky admitted, 'and he's somewhere around Jarry's age.'

'Good looking?'

'Very.'

'Is he in love with you? You could persuade him—'

Nicky shrugged, ignoring the question, and admitted, 'I might be able to. But he's in the States at present.'

'I suppose you'll have to live with him when he comes back,' said Juliet meditatively, but with a little giggle. 'Do you suppose you'll finish up marrying him, Nicky? For girls like us, let's face it, marriage is about the only thing, isn't it? It would be different if we were clever or career-minded— like Patricia James, remember, who always wanted to be a doctor, or Marilyn Scobie doing social work? Or even Jenny Birdsall who was going to be a cooking demonstrator.'

Nicky supposed Juliet was right—it would be different. But she wouldn't end up marrying Guy, and as for living with him in his bachelor flat, she never would, and he certainly wouldn't want her to. Nor could she live with Claudia again, after that letter she had written her. Nicky's whole future, in fact, seemed terribly uncertain.

Now that Juliet's French love affair had taken a new lease of life, she completely lost interest in her collages. Pieces of coarse linen lay about the place, there seemed to be coloured scraps of material everywhere, wherever she had left them. Daisy and Noreen, who had

been scolded before this for daring to interfere with them, were now told to put the whole lot on the scrap heap. Juliet was as restless as Nicky, though for a different reason. Nicky found the day interminable, and she knew it was because she was waiting—though why, she didn't know—for Jarratt to come home. She was watering the garden when Juliet suggested they should go over to the schoolhouse and see what Lewis was doing over there.

Nicky didn't think they would be welcome, but Lewis didn't mind at all, and let them sit at the back of the room while he carried on with his lessons. Nicky found it interesting to see him handle a group of such different ages, but it wasn't long before Juliet decided it was too hot in the schoolroom, despite the big fan that whirred monotonously in the ceiling. So they went back to the garden.

After lunch, while the children were resting, Juliet suggested to Nicky that they should go for a swim.

'When the children wake up,' said Nicky. 'Then Cass can come too.'

'Oh,' 'we don't have to wait for Catherine,' Juliet said offhandedly, and Cass flushed but merely said in her quiet way, 'No, of course you don't. I can come over later.'

'Will you, Cass?' Nicky asked, before she and Juliet set off. She didn't want Cass to have the feeling she was an outsider, that she was pairing off with Juliet and forgetting her.

Cass said with a smile, 'We'll be there—if the children feel like a swim.'

But they didn't come. Nicky and Juliet swam and lazed, and swam again, and then both of them fell asleep in the shade.

When they went back to the homestead, Nicky's heart gave a leap as she saw the utility there. Jarratt was home. Without being aware of it, she began to hurry.

'What's the rush?' Juliet protested. 'Let Jarratt wait for his dinner. You're not employed here, you know, Nicky.'

However, in the side garden, Jarratt and Cass were already setting up a barbecue meal, while Marcie-Ann bustled round with plates and table napkins, and Medora hung around Jarratt, watching him prepare the fire. It was a pretty domestic scene, and Nicky was shocked at her own reaction. Sheer green ugly jealousy. Of Cass. As if she had any right--

'It's Cook's night off,' called Cass gaily, catching sight of them. 'Jarry and I have taken over tonight.'

Jarratt lifted Medora and turned from the barbecue to greet his sister and Nicky. His eyes lingered on Nicky and she knew this was what she had been waiting for all day—to have him look at her, give her this feeling of excitement that was in no way related to the warm feeling she used to have when she thought of Howdie. 'You two shoot off and get yourselves showered or dressed up or whatever,' Jarratt said.

'I'm going to make orange drink,' Marcie-Ann said importantly.

Medora rolled her eyes at Jarry. 'What kin I do, Uncle Jarry?'

'You can help me burn the steaks, Medora,' he told her solemnly.

Nicky and Juliet went into the house.

'So that's why she didn't turn up,' said Juliet, meaning Cass of course. 'She's making progress, isn't she? I don't think Tracy will encourage her, but all the same, let's hope she gets to teachers' college next year.'

Nicky said nothing. Her feelings were terribly confused. She wanted to defend Cass, but she was burning with intolerable jealousy.

After she had showered, she dressed with care in a long blue skirt and a sleeveless top of green and blue sea island cotton. Cass, she remembered, was in jeans and checked shirt, with her hair straggling over her shoulders. 'She's not out to win him,' she thought. 'No matter what Juliet says. She's grateful to him and she admires him. That's why she looks so happy.'

But Jarratt—was he in love with Cass? Nicky would have given anything to know. She felt sick thinking about it. Because if he was, then how could he behave as he sometimes did to her, Nicky? Why did he look at her the way he did—take her in his arms—call her Rainbow in that intimate way? Why did he wake and come to her if she was having a nightmare, comfort her—even if it did end up as a scrap of sorts? She couldn't understand any of it.

The barbecue, despite everything, was fun. Lewis, who shared it with them, talked to Nicky as the light faded about aboriginal education, about the problems of teaching the children white man's knowledge without alienating them from families in whose lives the old ideas and traditions still had the most meaning.

'Their education has to be useful, relevant, yet one has to realise that so many of our values still seem quite arbitrary or even totally incomprehensible to them and their parents.'

Nicky was interested, yet she found it an effort to keep her mind on what he was saying. The darkness had come—suddenly, as it did here—and Jarry went on to the verandah to switch on lights. Nicky watched him go, handsome and narrow-hipped in his light-coloured pants and open-necked navy and white striped shirt. Handsome? Yes—she found him devastatingly handsome. His attraction for her was even increased by that suggestion of the brute that had often in

the past jarred on her. He was rugged rather than rough, masculine rather than uncivilised, and there were tenderness and humour in his make-up too, she had learned.

Suddenly she became aware that Cass was watching him too, with that wistful, gentle smile on her lips.

Lewis said softly, 'That kid certainly adores the boss, doesn't she?'

Nicky glanced at him. She said faintly, 'You mean— Cass?'

'Who else? Excuse me--' He went over to Juliet, who was standing near the table, looking around for a corkscrew to open a new bottle of wine.

'Cass adores the boss,' thought Nicky, baffled. She had decided that Cass admired him—was grateful. But exactly what had Lewis meant? He had called Cass 'that kid', so surely all that implied was that she was like—well, like Marcie-Ann or Medora, the way she looked up to Jarratt. And anyhow, Cass was studying—Cass's whole heart was set on becoming a teacher. 'Yet if I were Cass,' Nicky admitted to herself, 'wouldn't I adore the boss?'

It wasn't till Cass had taken the children in to put them to bed that Nicky received any attention from Jarratt. Lewis was pointing out some constellation to Juliet, and Nicky was clearing up the mess they had made with the barbecue and being determinedly practical. Jarratt came to help her and commented, 'You're very quiet tonight, Rainbow. What's the trouble? Not enough sleep last night?'

She merely smiled slightly, and after a few moments he remarked, 'I'm driving out to the muster camp tomorrow with some supplies for the cook. Do you want to come?'

Her heart leapt. Of course she wanted to come, to have him to herself; yet something made her hesitate, a feeling that she should say no. She hadn't answered when Juliet joined them.

'What are you two talking about?'

'I've just been inviting Nicky to come out on the run with me tomorrow.'

'Oh, have you? I'd like to come too,' said Juliet surprisingly.

Nicky thought Jarratt frowned slightly, but he said agreeably enough, 'Come by all means, Juliet. I'd have asked you if I'd known you'd be interested. What's happened? Is it a change of heart? Or is boredom catching up with you?'

'I'm getting acclimatised,' said Juliet, not meaning it, as Nicky at least knew.

Nicky went on packing up the dishes. She felt shamefully disappointed. It wouldn't be the same with Juliet there too, yet she had felt she shouldn't go, so now she would be quite safe. From herself, from Jarratt. Lewis went back to his bungalow, and presently when Juliet and Jarratt and Nicky were on the verandah, Cass came out to ask, 'Jarry—about Howard--'

She didn't have to say any more. Jarratt said so shortly that Cass looked quite crestfallen, 'Howard can come back with me when I go to Alice for Tracy. I'm not going to make a special trip.' He added with a significant glance at Nicky, 'If he's in a particular hurry, he'll find some means of getting here without my help, you can be sure of that.'

Next day, as they drove out with Jarratt, Juliet was full of chatter and questions. Nicky thought she was rather overplaying her hand if this was her idea of giving an impression of bowing to the inevitable. It

was enough to make anyone suspicious, and Jarratt asked, 'What's making you so cheerful? The thought that Tracy will soon be back?'

Juliet shrugged her slim shoulders and tossed back her long blonde hair. 'Can't I take an interest? I thought that's what you were always wanting me to do—you ought to be pleased.'

'Oh, I am,' he assured her dryly.

They had left the homestead late in the morning and they stopped for a picnic lunch in the red gorge that Nicky had driven through with Jarratt once before. There the shadows were cool, and the pools of water that lay here and there on the wide rocky bed of the river were so clear they looked to be no more than an inch deep. Yet if you plunged your hand in, you were surprised. Juliet's simulated enthusiasm didn't extend to physical energy, and after they had eaten, she stayed sprawling exhaustedly in the shade while the other two, at Jarratt's suggestion, took a leisurely stroll.

The rock over which they walked looked as ancient as time itself. It was a conglomerate, with smooth shining waterworn stones of varying sizes set in the contrasting texture of a coarse red matrix. Nicky saw yellow and purple flowers blooming in shady damp spots, and paused to admire the pale silky-tasselled flowers of a native orange, that Jarratt told her were so fragile they lasted only a day. As they moved on, a dragon lizard rippled across their path, then stopped stone still, its colour changing from rock red- to an unobtrusive greenish grey that made it almost invisible against the muted ground cover.

Nicky looked up at Jarratt, her eyes laughing her delight, and as she met his glance she felt a little shock in her heart that sobered her.

'You love it here, don't you?' he said, holding her gaze with a challenge in his own. 'Have you been here—in the outback—before?'

'I—I told you, I lived in Alice once.'

'And before that?' he persisted, and when she didn't answer at once he said with an odd look in his dark eyes, 'You don't talk about yourself much, do you, Rainbow? It's not shameful being an orphan, you know ... Who did you say your guardian was?'

'Guy Sonder.'

He frowned. 'You know I don't mean Guy Sonder. The other man, the one who was a friend of your parents, I recall you said, the one who died recently.'

'Jack Lane.' She said it softly, seeing Jack's face, hearing Jack's voice. The whole story was there hovering on her lips, waiting to be poured out. Jarratt was leaning back against a great red boulder, his eyes fixed compellingly on her face, and Nicky looked back at him, uncertain. She longed to talk to him about Jack, about the parents she didn't remember, about Alice Springs and the foster-home —to tell him everything. Yet as she hesitated, coherent thought vanished, she couldn't have talked if she had tried. She became a captive of those warm dark eyes, her body grew weak, she was filled with one overpowering desire—the desire to have him take her in his arms, smother her lips with his own—

She was shaken when he moved abruptly, looked at his watch and said briefly, 'It's time we were on our way.'

She didn't have another moment alone with him after that, not until they reached home. They had shared the evening meal with the ringers round the campfire, and it was very late when they got back. Everyone had gone to bed, and no doubt the two little girls were sleeping over at Cass's bungalow. Juliet staggered exhausted up the steps and went straight through to her room with a murmured,

'Goodnight'. But when Nicky would have followed her across the verandah, Jarratt reached out and pulled her back.

'Don't go yet,' he muttered against her hair. 'I have to talk to you.'

'What about?' she breathed.

He put his hands on her waist and turned her slowly round to face him. There was no light except that of the moon coming in through the vines that wreathed the verandah posts. His face looked dark above hers, and she could feel the roughness of his chin as it brushed against her forehead.

'What do you think about?' he asked huskily. 'Us—all the things we've been saying to each other without words. The things your eyes have been telling me all day—in the gorge at noon—over the campfire when we were eating——'

She drew in her breath sharply, incredulously. 'Oh, Jarratt--' she whispered, and his lips found hers.

They didn't talk after all. They stood on the moonlit verandah kissing until she was breathless, their bodies close against each other. He murmured against her ear, his hands caressed her, his lips were on her eyelids, on the corner of her mouth, on her throat, and she felt sick with desire for him." He could have done anything he liked with her, her senses were reeling as if she were intoxicated—as in a way she was. Then as she clung to him, his hands gripped her arms hard and he said hoarsely, 'I think we'd better break it up, Rainbow. This is a dangerous hour to be making love, and we're both of us too tired to think straight.'

Nicky closed her eyes, her heart thudding. She had to struggle with herself not to beg him to make love to her. He was right about the danger, but she didn't care, and as for their being too tired to think straight, she knew only too well what she thought—felt—about

Jarratt Buchan now. And surely the words he had whispered in her ear, straight from his roused senses, were an admission that for him she had become—special. She lifted her face to his imploringly, her eyes seeking his, and with a groan, he once more crushed his mouth against her own. She felt an ache all through her body as she responded unresistingly to the urgency of his lips, suddenly to find herself thrust away from him, and to hear him mutter, 'Rainbow, don't do this to me--'

The very intensity of his voice brought her to her senses as they stood, breathing unevenly and audibly, and looking at each other through the darkness. Nicky's emotions gradually calmed, and she knew she had to co-operate with him in not letting things get out of control. She reached out and touched his hand.

'Goodnight, Jarratt,' she whispered tremulously, and immediately she went quietly into the house, leaving him on the dark verandah. She wondered how she would feel when she saw him next morning, but though he hadn't left the homestead, she didn't encounter him until well after breakfast. The three girls were on the side verandah, and Cass was on the point of departing with Marcie-Ann and Med- ora to give them their morning lessons when Jarratt came round from the office, where, it emerged, he had been in contact with Alice Springs over the two-way radio.

'I'm going in to Alice today,' he said without preamble, and they all stared at him. Nicky felt her heart drop. Tracy must be coming home. She and Juliet would be leaving. It was the end of the world. She stared at him, her eyes wide and tragic, and was shocked at the remote look he gave her, as if she were the last person on his mind.

Juliet asked hopefully, 'Is Tracy coming home?' and Cass followed up with, 'Oh, Jarry, can Howard come back with you?'

Howard! Nicky felt ashamed of her own reaction to the sound of his name. She felt a deep reluctance at the thought of having to deal with him again. All that childhood thing was completely finished, and it would be simply awkward. But then, she reminded herself, if Tracy came back, she wouldn't be here much longer. She could have wept.

Jarratt answered Cass first. 'Sure, Howard can come back if that's what he wants. He's going to be no use to me for a while, so it will be entirely up to him.'

'Oh, he'll want to come,' Cass insisted, and looked at Nicky, her hazel eyes smiling dreamily. Nicky looked away from her, feeling sick.

Marcie-Ann piped up, 'Is Mummy coming home, Uncle Jarry?'

'Not yet, sweetheart,' said Jarratt—and hope sprang back into Nicky's heart. 'I'll talk to you later, Catherine.'

Cass, taking this as a hint that it was time to take the children away, departed, and Juliet asked impatiently, 'What's the great hurry about going to Alice if Tracy's not coming home? You'd think she was well enough by now, at any rate.'

'She wants to see me, that's all I know,' said Jarry briefly. 'I got the message over the air this morning.' He looked at Nicky, and now his eyes were warm and meaningful. 'Will you come to Alice, Nicky?'

Nicky flushed. He didn't mean because of Howdie, she was certain. His eyes told her that. It was because of last night. Last night they had both been too tired to think straight, but today was new, and it was all beginning.

She nodded, and Juliet complained, 'What about me? Don't I get asked?'

Jarry's eyebrows rose. 'I'd have thought the notion of driving all the way to Alice in the heat and the dust would have been too much for you to contemplate.'

Juliet shrugged. 'If you five in the bush, you have to do something. A trip to Alice seems pretty exciting, all things considered. Why do you suppose Tracy wants to see you, anyhow?'

'I wouldn't know,' he said guardedly.

'Perhaps she's homesick, and missing the children. You could engage a nurse to look after her here.'

'You're speculating. But in any case, it wouldn't mean that you and Nicky were no longer needed around the place, if that's what's in your mind.'

'Oh, it wasn't,' said Juliet with a falsely bright smile. 'I realise that I've become invaluable ... Anyhow, to get down to basics, when do we leave?'

'About noon,' he said with a frown. 'I can't get away this morning, I have several things to see to. We'll have a snack before we go. We'll have to spend the night in Alice.'

'Marvellous!' exclaimed Juliet. 'We'd better look over our clothes, Nicky. Who knows, Jarry might give us the thrill of taking us out dining somewhere tonight.'

Now that the threat of having to leave Coochin Brim-brim in the very near future had been removed, Nicky was happy again and full of excitement. It would be fun to dine out in Alice—even if it were in a threesome. The only thing that spoilt her pleasure was the thought of Howard's coming back. The fact was, she had let him kiss her, make love to her—she had let him see how she felt about seeing him again. He would hardly expect her feelings to have changed so drastically,

and he would undoubtedly want to kiss her again. Even if he had been winged, as Jarratt had put it, he was not totally incapacitated. It was absurd, when she came to think of it, that she was here in the Never-Never with two men to handle, when one was all she wanted. But of course, girls were scarce. Not so scarce in Alice Springs, however, so perhaps after all Howard wouldn't be eager to come back to the cattle station.

Cass, she discovered, had no doubts at all as to what Howdie would choose to do.

Nicky packed a small bag with the things she would need for a night away, and included a long skirt and a cool evening blouse. Then she went into the garden to water a few plants she had been bringing along. Presently Cass appeared with the children, and Nicky went to join them in the side garden where two swings had been rigged up under the trees. The little girls had already climbed on to the seats, and Nicky and Cass gave them a few pushes then went to sit in the shade.

'Is Jarry still going to Alice today, or has he put it off?' Cass wanted to know.

'He's going today.' Evidently Jarratt had not yet talked to Cass about the situation. 'Tracy wants to see him for some reason or other. Juliet and I are going too, and we'll stay away for the night.'

'And tomorrow you'll be back with Howdie,' Cass said with satisfaction. 'That will be really beaut—the three of us together again at last. I can't wait, can you? Howdie's probably champing at the bit too—wanting to be back. It's funny how it's all working out, isn't it, even if he did break his collarbone. You two will still see a whole lot more of each other than if he had to stay out at the camp working the stock.'

She moved away for a moment to give Medora a few more pushes, then came back to the seat and pushed back her hair from her plump face. Nicky had been trying to think how she could explain that Cass must accept that she and Howard weren't, after all, going to fall in love and marry and live happily ever after, but before she could even begin, Cass said with a rush, 'Nicky, I have to confess something. I was so scared when you came here that you'd fall in love with Jarratt. I mean, he's so—so terrific. Or at least, I think so.'

She paused and Nicky's heart stood still. Cass's hazel eyes—that she had wanted so much to be blue eyes—were watching her trustfully, and Nicky knew intuitively exactly what she was going to say just an instant before she said it.

'I'm terribly—*terribly*—in love with him. Had you guessed?'

Nicky swallowed. Her throat was dry, and somehow she managed a smile. 'No, I—I didn't quite guess, Cass.'

'Well—it's a quiet sort of love,' Cass murmured. 'When he's helping me with my homework and he looks up at me—I have this feeling inside, all warm and happy and melting. He has the most wonderful eyes—looking at them's like heaven. Oh, I can't tell you! And sometimes we have long talks, Jarry and I. Not so much since you and Juliet came, there isn't so much time. But when Tracy was here—I can tell him anything, ask him anything—and I know he wants to hear it all, and that he understands. It's the most wonderful feeling. And I wouldn't care if he didn't have a penny, I truly wouldn't. It just doesn't count when you really love someone, does it?'

'No,' Nicky agreed, 'no.' She felt stunned, shaken. While Cass had been pouring out her love, for Nicky the world had turned upside down. She was sickeningly aware of just how much she had been expecting of Jarratt, and now Cass was practically confessing to a belief that Jarratt was in love with *her*. How could a man love a girl

like Cass—so wholesome, so thoroughly nice—and behind her back make love to her best friend, who just happened to have turned up out of the blue for a short while?

For a short while. That was the crucial thing. Nicky was here just while Juliet was here. Cass had been here for months. They must know each other really well, she and Jarratt. What was between them wasn't a flickering elusive mirage, like this thing that had sprung up between Nicky and Jarratt. She remembered how Jarratt had said last night they must break it up because they were too tired to think straight. Was that the only reason he had made love to her—because he had been too tired to think straight, and remember Cass? Or had he meant that it was a toss-up between her and Cass, as far as he was concerned? Was his heart as little involved as that?

It was ironic that Cass read in his eyes the same thing that she read in them—that Cass too had that warm melting feeling. Nicky felt sick. She wished—oh, how she wished!—that she had never come here chasing Howard. She could see the utter absurdity of that now. She had been as silly as Cass with her dreams of flying. Now there was nothing for it but for her to step aside—to go away, to leave the field to Cass, who had been here first. You don't—you just *don't*—steal your best friend's man. She thought of the story Aunty Pat used to tell about the two girls in love with the prince, and how the wicked fairy had braided their hair together so that neither was free unless one of them agreed to sacrifice her beautiful hair. She and Cass had said the same thing—'If it were you and me, I'd have *my* hair cut off.'

Nicky thought she could hate Jarratt Buchan for his heartlessness—really hate him. Briefly, she thanked heaven that nothing had happened between him and her—yet. And she prayed that the ending might be quick—that Tracy would come home after all, that she and Juliet could go. *Soon.*

'Your exams,' she asked Cass with an effort, 'teachers' college. You don't care about that? You won't go?'

Cass gave her wistful smile. 'I don't know. You see, love isn't to be rushed. If Jarry wants me to go, then I'll go. But I'd rather just stay here any day, even if it's only to look after Marcie-Ann and Medora ... What I would like most,' she resumed after a brief pause, 'would be for you and Howdie and Jarry and me to be here together—for ever.'

Nicky tried to smile. 'Is that your third wish, Cass?' she asked wryly, knowing it was just as impossible as the others. 'You remember—blue eyes--'

'And flying---'

'And something about love,' Nicky finished, with a twist in her heart.

'The only one that could come true,' said Cass. 'And the only one that matters.'

Nicky bit her Hp. 'Make your third wish a simple one, Cass. Just about you and—and Jarry. I don't think I shall ever live here.'

'I suppose not,' said Cass regretfully. 'Howdie's probably trying—to line up something super in the way of jobs in Alice. You'll know what's happened by tonight, won't you? And tomorrow when you come back, the three of us will have a tremendous get-together--'

Nicky struggled inwardly with herself for several seconds. It was wrong to let Cass hope like this, yet she couldn't admit just now that she didn't care a fig for Howdie Johnston. Cass would want to know why, what had happened.

She got from the seat. 'We're to have an early lunch—we'll be leaving soon. I'd better see what's happening in the kitchen.'

As she walked away, her legs were shaking. The whole world had changed in a matter of minutes, and all she wanted to do was to run away and hide. Instead, she went into the house to see about lunch.

CHAPTER EIGHT

IN the kitchen, Lena was throwing a salad together. It looked exactly like that, and today Nicky didn't go to the rescue and try to make something elegant of it. It would have to do as it was.

Instead, she went to her bedroom and shut the door.

There, she kicked off her shoes and sat on the edge of her bed and stared at her bare feet. She thought of Jarratt Buchan who last night had kissed her and kissed her, and whispered in her ear, and generally stirred her up so that she had been certain he had fallen in love with her. He hadn't played fair—not with her, certainly not with Cass—and she had been gullible—oh, terribly, terribly gullible, to think he had meant those things he had murmured to her. She didn't, when she came to consider it, imagine for a moment that he was even in the process of deciding who would make the better wife for a cattleman—Catherine Johnston or Rainbow Reay. He had simply been amusing himself with her because she was available.

She frowned as a new thought struck her. The choice when it comes to marriage was very limited in the outback. Juliet had remarked on that. She had also said that he'd never marry anyone *like* Catherine—anyone *beneath him*—unless he were pushed into a corner. **At** the time she said that, it hadn't entered Nicky's head that Jarratt would think that way or consider Cass beneath him. Yet could he possibly be having second thoughts, now there were two girls to choose from? It was an unpalatable thought, and yet it persisted. Cass's brother was a stockman—an employee. Nicky wondered how much Jarratt knew about the rest of the Johnston family. She didn't know much herself except that Cass's stepmother was a disagreeable person with an ugly voice, who allowed her stepchildren to live in a foster-home rather than be bothered with them.

Jarry, with his propensity for asking questions when he wanted to know something, had possibly wormed some information out of Cass. With Nicky, he had not been very successful. He had drawn several blanks when she had clammed up on him. But when it came to the point—Nicky smiled bitterly—Rainbow Reay didn't have much of a background even if she had attended the same school as Juliet. So the choice, if he only knew it, was not all that wide when it came to marrying beneath him. If by Juliet's standards it was undesirable to sit down to dinner with a stockman, then how about a rough type like a crocodile shooter, Nicky's father? Someone probably quite like Jack Lane, with a leathery face, hands like sandpaper, few refinements when it came to society manners, and a vocabulary as rough as his voice? The fact that he had been gentle with Nicky and worked like a demon so she could become a lady didn't count.

Quite decidedly it was time for Nicky Reay to backpedal. Time for her to—to have her hair lopped off.

Nicky got up and went to the mirror and stared sadly at herself. Blue eyes, curly auburn hair, freckles, a heart- shaped face. She thought of Cass's pleasant face and hazel eyes and that dignified kind of beauty that had so surprised her that day at the waterhole. Rainbow Reay had no advantages at all over a girl like Cass. Blue eyes didn't matter...

'It's all over,' she told herself silently. What sort of a fool do you have to be to come as a short-term guest to a cattle station and fall in love with the boss?

Yet it had just happened. As simply as that, without her ever knowing it was going to. But that, she supposed, was how it was when it came to falling in love. Hearts ruled over heads any day, providing you had a heart. If you didn't, then you worked it all out in your head and it didn't hurt at all. Was Jarratt doing that?

If so, then she wasn't going along with his game any further. In fact, she didn't think she'd even go to Alice Springs with him today. She couldn't. It would make her sick.

She had actually opened her suitcase and started to un-pack when she realised that not going would mean a day practically alone with Cass; questions about Howard; and even if she successfully parried those, inevitably, talk about Jarratt.

She put her clothes back in the case. It would be painful, but she would have to go to Ahce. But if Jarratt thought she was in love with him, he was going to be disillusioned. She would make sure he knew that last night she *had* been too tired to think straight. If she had been in full possession of her senses, she would never have slumped into his arms as she had done, or so avidly returned his kisses. For Rainbow Reay—no, for *Nichola* Reay—it was all just an interlude before she went back to Adelaide where she belonged. It was great to have a holiday in the Never-Never, but it was great too to go back to the city. True, she'd grown out of Howdie Johnston, but her future was ahead of her and there were momentous discoveries to be made.

Goodbye, Jarratt Buchan, she thought, and the smile she forced to her lips turned into a sob.

The first thing they did when they reached Ahce late that afternoon was to book into a motel, where Juliet and Nicky were to share a unit and Jarry would occupy an adjacent one. The girls washed their dusty faces and changed their clothes. Jarry was going to the hospital to see Tracy, and Juliet was going with him.

'You'll want to go and look up Howard Johnston, Nicky,' Jarratt remarked, and Juliet stared at him in amazement.

'Why on earth would Nicky want to do that? Just because she knew Catherine years ago?'

'Well, it's up to Nicky,' snapped Jarratt, who was not in the best of moods. Nicky had been very very cool to him during the long drive, withdrawn and uncommunicative, and she knew he had been baffled—after her behaviour of last night. But then he didn't know what Cass had been telling her. 'There's no point in her traing along with us,' he said now. 'She doesn't know Tracy from Adam—or from Eve, I should say.' He returned his attention to Nicky.

'You might as well ask Howard to have dinner with us tonight.'

'Jarry! Is that necessary?' Juliet was outraged. 'I mean —one of your stockmen--'

'He's also Catherine's brother,' Jarry retorted, his black eyes glittering dangerously. Obviously he didn't think Cass Johnston was beneath him, and while Nicky was glad, she was also sick with jealousy. She was thankful when a little later he let her out of the car at the guest house where Howard was staying, and as he drove off she went up the steps to the front door and rang the bell, feeling decidedly nervous, especially when she remembered those kisses under the trees at the muster camp.

But she need not have felt nervous, for Howard wasn't there.

'Howard Johnston? No, love, he's not here now,' she was told by a pleasant-faced woman with her hair in curlers who came to the door.

'Do you know when he'll be in, please? I'm a friend of his.'

'He won't be in, love. When I said he's not here, I meant he's left. He went off yesterday.'

'Oh.' Nicky was taken aback. 'Do you know where he went?'

'Not exactly. Down south with a young couple who're driving round Australia. Heading for Adelaide they were, but I don't know how far *he* was going. With that broken collarbone, I said to him he should stay put. But of course it was none of my business, and I dare say he'll be all right. Sorry I can't help you further, love. Where have you come from?'

'The cattle station where he was working,' Nicky said briefly. She smiled and thanked the woman and went thoughtfully away. Howard appeared to be making the most of his free time, and, what was more, he didn't seem over-anxious to get back to Coochin Brim-brim and Nicky Reay. Cass would be sadly disappointed, but Nicky was relieved. The whole situation would have been impossible, with Cass so romantically and unrealistically determined on a happy ending to a very youthful and very insubstantial love affair.

She glanced at her watch. She had almost an hour to fill in- before it was time to meet Jarratt and Juliet at the motel. She decided to go back to her room and have a rest, it was something she could really do with after such a day.

She had actually slept and was just out of the shower and in panties and bra when Juliet came in. One look at her face was enough to tell Nicky that something was not pleasing her. Her grey-green eyes were smouldering as she slung her handbag on to her bed, kicked off her shoes and glared at herself in the mirror.

'What's wrong?' asked Nicky tentatively. The skirt and top she was going to wear were spread out on her bed, and she picked up her brush and started brushing her hair.

'Everything,' said Juliet sweepingly. 'Every rotten thing. Tracy's not coming back to Coochin Brim-brim. I'm in a *trap*. Jarry's going to expect me to stay there for ever. I've got a good mind to—to-' She stopped and grabbed a tissue from the box on the dressing table and

blew her nose hard, and Nicky realised she was close to tears. When she had composed herself, she told Nicky more coherently what had happened. Tracy had met a man called Max Bonney. She had fallen in love with him and had every intention of marrying him and going to Adelaide to live.

Nicky was mystified. 'How can she possibly have met any men as she's been in hospital all this time?'

'Oh, Tracy's in a two-bed room, and his aunt or someone was in the other bed. He used to come to visit her, and when she was discharged, he kept coming—to see Tracy. She's been seeing him every day, but now he has to go back to Adelaide, and that was why she wanted to see Jarry.'

'Whatever does Jarratt think about it?'

'He's reserving his opinion till he's met the man—which will be tonight, because he's asked him to join us for dinner.' Juliet didn't ask about Howard. Apparently she had completely forgotten about him, which was not strange as she'd never met him and had never been interested in him. 'I hope he's *horrible*,' Juliet decided, beginning to make preparations for her shower. 'I hope Jarry will tell Tracy it's no go.'

'Oh, Juliet, that's mean,' Nicky protested. 'After all, wouldn't it be a good thing for Tracy to marry again? She has those two little children to bring up—they need a father--'

'Well then, she shouldn't have got herself married to the wrong man in the first place,' said Juliet unsympathetically. 'It's her own fault she's in a mess.' She blinked her eyes rapidly. 'Oh, I don't know—of course I'd like to see poor old Tracy married again and really happy, but—her mouth twisted—I don't want to be left holding the baby. Looking after Jarry, in other words. It would solve all our problems if

he'd only find himself a wife, but I guess he's too bossy for most women. And who'd want to live in the middle of nowhere? What do you think?' she asked, turning back from the door of the shower room.

Nicky flushed deeply. 'Me?'

'Yes. Would you want to marry him?'

Nicky forced a laugh. 'What a question to ask! I—I scarcely know him, and--'

'I know. You don't have to be polite because he's my half-brother. He's too old, and you wouldn't like to live out in the bush, and you don't fancy being told what to do for the rest of your life.' Juliet sighed and closed the shower door behind her.

'Wrong,' thought Nicky, 'on three counts.'

Mindlessly, she began to get into her skirt, her top, her sandals. Her hair was newly washed and shining, and her freckles were minimised by the light tan she had acquired. She applied a little lipstick and eye-shadow, and looked at the time. Jarratt had said they would meet at seven-forty-five in the motel restaurant. It was now seven-forty-seven, and Juliet was still under the shower. She knocked on the door and called out, 'Will you be long, Juliet? We're going to be late.'

'Well, I'm not going to hurry,' Juliet answered unco-operatively. 'You go ahead. You can have a drink with Jarry while you're waiting for me.' Nicky hesitated. She didn't relish the idea of a tete-a-tete with Jarratt, as things stood. But Max Bonney would be there. Reluctantly, she left the motel unit, pulling the door shut behind her. It was incredible to realise that only this morning she had been longing to be alone with Jarratt, and that now she had to be cool to him, because he was out of bounds.

When she reached the restaurant she saw him sitting at the small cocktail bar at the far end of the room, frowning rather moodily over a glass of Scotch. As she stood there uncertainly, he looked up and saw her and got to his feet. She was sure he was alone, and she wished she had waited for Juliet after all, but now it was too late. His eyes were on her as she made her way towards him, and she knew with a feeling of dread that he was bound to ask her why she had been so withdrawn this afternoon.

As she drew nearer and her glance met his fully, her heart seemed to miss a beat. That warm sexy look was still there for her, no matter what she had done, or how she had behaved. Or was it there not specifically for her, but merely because she happened to be a female? Cass too, she reminded herself, melted under that black smouldering gaze.

She glanced away from him with an effort and looked around the restaurant. 'I hope you haven't been waiting long,' she heard herself say aloofly.

He consulted his watch. 'Eight and a half minutes,' he said accurately. 'Where's Howard Johnston?'

Howard! Nicky had completely forgotten him. She coloured deeply. 'He—he's gone. He left Alice a day or two ago with some people he met.' She dared a glance at him through her lashes and saw his frown deepen.

'You had him on your mind today, all the way from Coochin Brim-brim to Alice Springs, hadn't you?' he accused.

'No—yes,' she altered it wildly, calculating it might be best for him to believe she had. He put his hand under her elbow—and at his touch she felt a sort of helplessness overcome her.

He murmured, 'Look, we'll find a quiet table where we can have an aperitif together. We can't talk here at the bar. What's become of Juliet, by the way?'

'She was still in the shower,' she said huskily, despising herself for going along with him so meekly.

'Then we shouldn't be disturbed for a little while. Max won't be here for twenty minutes or so yet.'

Listening, Nicky was filled with alarm. She didn't want twenty minutes undisturbed with Jarratt Buchan, it was far too dangerous. She didn't know if she could keep herself under control that long. The mere touch of his fingers on her arm made her quiver, and she was already aware of sensations she ought not to be experiencing—not now she knew how badly he had behaved, not now she knew about Cass.

The waitress found them a table quickly. Service in Alice Springs was inclined to be casual, but where Jarratt Buchan was concerned it was different. Their table was secluded, discreetly lit, and in no time at all Nicky was nervously sipping a pink gin and Jarratt had another Scotch, and across the table he was staring at her. No matter how hard she fought against it, eventually she had to raise her eyes to his.

He said softly in that murmurous, deep-toned voice that did drastic things to her metabolism, 'So what's bothering you, Rainbow? Are you going to tell me?'

She shook her head. 'Nothing's bothering me.' She felt terribly vulnerable. She was convinced her eyes were telling him all the things she was determined were no longer true.

'That's a he,' he said after a moment. 'You're cut up because Howard's moved off. Is that it? I thought you'd put that little affair sensibly back in the past where it belongs.'

She played with the long glass swizzle-stick in her pink gin, lowering her lashes defensively. 'Did you?' was all she said.

There was a long tense pause, then he said tightly, 'You say that to me, in that cool little voice, after letting me make love to you as I did last night?'

'You didn't—make love to me,' she said indistinctly, though her cheeks flushed to crimson, then paled. 'You— you kissed me, that was all.'

'It wasn't all, and you know it. If we hadn't done something about it, we'd have been making love in earnest. Look, Rainbow, have you somehow got it into your head that you owe it to Howard—to Catherine—to whip into life a love affair that's now fizzled out completely, if it ever got started? If you have, then you're being totally unrealistic. You're confusing sentiment with sincerity—sentimentality with love. Okay, you're only nineteen, but you have a basic maturity about you for all that. I've remarked on it before, and I'll admit I'm always surprised at your lapses.' He stopped, and she could feel the penetrating regard of his black eyes. 'Has Catherine been talking to you?' he asked abruptly.

Nicky's lids flew up and her pulses jumped guiltily.

'What about?' she asked huskily.

'About you and Howard, of course. Yes? I suspected as much ... Well, I advise you not to take too much notice of Catherine. She's a dyed-in-the-wool romantic, despite her agreeable ability to deal with practical everyday matters so competently.'

Nicky listened, her heart hammering madly. Of course Cass had been talking to her about Howard—but she had also been talking about Jarratt, though he didn't know *that*.

'Just don't think you have to arrange your life to fit in with her long-cherished dreams, that's all,' he continued, and through her lashes she could see his mouth curve in a faint and somehow disturbing smile. 'I can see I'll have to redouble my efforts to captivate you, if I'm to convince you of the sense in what I'm saying.'

Nicky bit her lip. She was well aware of the effect any further efforts from Jarratt were likely to have on her. But there weren't going to be any more kisses, there wasn't going to be any more lovemaking. He could save it all for Cass, not divide it up.

'You and I haven't seen a great deal of each other alone, have we?' he pursued. 'We have an extension of time, at all events. I suppose Juliet told you that Tracy wants to go to Adelaide when she comes out of hospital?'

'Yes, but--' Nicky took a deep breath. 'I don't want you to—redouble your efforts to—captivate me. There's just no point.' She looked at him helplessly. How could she tell him that she had no intention of competing for him against her best friend? It would be easier all round if she could simply persuade him she wasn't seriously interested—despite the fact that she had been rather carried away last night.

'No point?' He frowned, then raised his glass and drank down the contents. 'Why not? Howard? Or have you decided you don't like the outback?' His eyes narrowed. 'Or is it something to do with that guardian of yours?'

Nicky too was giving her attention to her drink, but in a more prolonged way. It was a pretty drink in a tall frosted glass. There was a bright cherry in it and a twist of lemon. The taste was slightly bitter, slightly astringent, and she took a long drink—then had the feeling that the gin had gone straight to her head because she had a strong compulsion to say, 'I love the outback—I don't care if I never see

Howard or Guy again. All I want is to stay at Coochin Brim-brim—with you—for ever.' Somehow she controlled herself, and told him aloofly, 'I don't really know what you're talking about. I came here with Juliet for a visit. I've—I've enjoyed myself, and I suppose I'll stay as long as she does. Unless it's *too* long. That was the arrangement—she asked me so she'd have company.'

'So you'd do the hard yakka, more like,' he corrected her, and now his voice had an icy edge to it. 'You're a cool little customer, aren't you? You say whatever suits you best. I know damned well you came here because of Catherine and Howard Johnston—'

'I didn't,' she retorted swiftly. 'I didn't know they worked for you when Juliet asked me to come. It was just—luck.'

'Or fate,' he suggested ironically.

Well, Nicky had believed in fate once. Maybe she still believed in it. But it wasn't a kind fate—not when it put you in the position she was in...'All right, fate,' she agreed wearily. He was leaning towards her across the table, his dark eyes smouldering so that she dared not look into them. She said defensively, 'Anyhow, when Juliet and I go you'll still have—have Cass.'

'Now what the hell are you getting at?' he exclaimed explosively, and she flinched at his tone.

'I'm not getting at anything. I'm just stating a fact. Cass will be there. And I—I shan't be sorry to go back to Adelaide.' Her voice was steady, and she hated herself for her lies, her air of indifference. And the way Jarratt was looking at her was deadly—it was killing her--

It was at that precarious moment that Max Bonney arrived, and directly behind him, looking pretty in a sparkling black and white evening dress, was Juliet, all smiles instead of scowls, all apologies

over being late. Jarratt, with a muttered, 'We'll have this out later,' got to his feet.

Max Bonney was thirtyish, mature, presentable, and he was full of open-minded goodwill towards Tracy's family. He wasn't being vetted, and he wasn't doing any vetting himself. This for him was a purely social occasion. After introductions had been made, dinner was ordered and the wines selected, and conversation proceeded to flow easily, mainly between the two men. Max was an Adelaide architect, he said, and this led to a discussion on Australian house styles and on pioneer homes in the outback. Politics were touched on, primary industry, cattle raising. The two men obviously approved of one another and the atmosphere was relaxed and friendly. For her part, Nicky thought Max Bonney a very likeable man, and even Juliet made no attempt to knock him, but was all charm and friendliness.

'Tracy and I realise we must experience each other in a more normal environment before we make any vital decisions,' Max said over coffee, accepting a cigarette from Jarratt, and holding his lighter for Juliet who was smoking too, though Nicky had declined. 'So far, I've rarely seen her out of bed, and never in anything more formal than a dressing gown.'

Jarry laughed and Nicky and Juliet exchanged smiles, and Max continued, 'I'd very much like her to come and stay with my parents in Adelaide when she's discharged from hospital. I'm afraid they're too elderly to cope with a couple of little girls, and Tracy seems doubtful that Mrs Buchan will be able to take them, so I'm hoping it will be possible for them to stay at Coochin Brim-brim for the time being.' He glanced at Juliet and then at Nicky, and settled for her. 'Are you the one who's in charge of them at present? Tracy was telling me about you.'

'Nicky is my guest,' Jarry broke in pleasantly. 'Their governess is with them at the homestead. You'll want to make their acquaintance if you and Tracy are considering teaming up.'

'Yes, of course. I like children—I have several young nephews and nieces, and the thought of an instant family doesn't appal me. On the contrary, in fact.'

Later, when they left the restaurant, the two men walked on still talking. Then Max turned to say goodnight to Juliet and Nicky, and Jarratt elected to walk with Max to his hotel, 'To ask him all the nosey questions he wouldn't put while we were listening,' Juliet said, as she and Nicky went to their motel suite.

'He's nice, isn't he?' said Nicky, as they unlocked the door and went in. She was feeling both relieved and disappointed that the evening had broken up already.

'I suppose so,' Juliet said gloomily, sitting on the edge of her bed. 'I told you I was in a trap, didn't I? Tracy won't come back. I'll be expected to devote myself to Jarry and Coochin Brim-brim for the rest of my life. Nobody cares that Marc wants me to marry him, or that I want to go back to France. It's just not fair.'

Nicky looked at her helplessly, torn between sympathy and impatience, for she couldn't imagine Jarratt holding his sister a prisoner. 'You're exaggerating, Juliet. You can't be made to do what you don't want to do—Jarratt wouldn't try to dominate your life like that.'

'Wouldn't he? You just don't know my brother. All the female members of the family are afraid of putting one foot in front of the other without getting his seal of approval first. Tracy's a married woman, but look how she's waited for him to come and meet this Max Thingummy before she makes a decision about him! And my

mother—she wouldn't go against his wishes for anything. Andrew was sensible in selling out his share of the property and making a life of his own in France, but I suppose it suits Jarry perfectly to be the only male on the property. I just wish he'd hurry up and get himself married, that's all. Pretty soon he'll be too old.'

Nicky was sitting in one of the easy chairs, and she said with only a faint tremor in her voice, 'There is Catherine, Juliet. I think Jarry likes her a lot.'

'Oh, rubbish!' exclaimed Juliet angrily. 'He's not going to make a fool of himself by marrying a girl he's employed as a governess. He just wouldn't be in it. What happened to Catherine's brother, anyhow? I'd forgotten all about him. Didn't he want to have dinner with us?'

Nicky shrugged. 'He's left Alice. I expect he'll come back to Coochin Brim-brim when he's fit for work again.'

'I expect he will,' Juliet agreed. 'I suppose he imagines his sister is going to marry the boss, and he'll be on to a really good thing. They're a couple of go-getters, in my opinion.'

Nicky's colour rose. 'Don't be so silly,' she snapped. 'They're nice people. They're honest and they work hard. If you were fair instead of being so—biased, you'd admit that Catherine would make an ideal wife for Jarratt.'

Juliet glared at her. 'Never!' she said, then, muttering something unintelligible, she got up and switched on the television set, and both of them sat there without speaking.

Nicky wondered if Juliet was merely pretending, as she was, to watch the programme that was showing. For her part;—She was very much on edge, upset at having quarrelled with Juliet, and wondering as well if at any minute Jarratt might knock on their door and insist she go out with him to continue the talk they had been having in the restaurant

before the others arrived. She would simply refuse, she decided, and it occurred to her that the smartest thing to do would be to go to bed and pretend to be asleep if he should turn up.

She did this, and lay with her face turned to the wall, her eyes wide open, and conscious of the sound from the television set. It wasn't going to be possible to avoid Jarratt indefinitely, and once they returned to Coochin Brim-brim, it wouldn't be at all easy to escape him. Suddenly she wondered why she didn't get on the plane tomorrow and fly back to Adelaide. But she didn't have her luggage, and she knew it wouldn't be fair to Juliet. As well as that, Cass would be deeply hurt.

'No, I'll stick it out somehow,' she thought, gritting her teeth. 'But I'll make it plain to Jarratt that he can't continue to play me and Cass off against each other,- if that's what he's been doing.'

After what seemed an interminable time, Juliet switched off the television set and came over to Nicky's bed.

'Are you asleep, Nicky?'

Nicky turned to face her with a sigh. 'No.'

'I'm sorry J was rude about your friends,' Juliet apologised. 'I was just feeling cranky, I suppose. But I'll get over it ... Did Jarry tell you we're not making an early start tomorrow? He promised Tracy he'd let her know what he thinks of her boy-friend. If I were Tracy, I wouldn't care what he thought.'

'All the same,' Nicky said thoughtfully, 'it's nice to be on good terms with your family, isn't it?'

'Nice old Nicky,' Juliet teased.

Nicky was wakened in the morning by a knock at the door indicating that their breakfast tray was about to be brought in. She sat up quickly, running her fingers through her hair. To her surprise Juliet, who answered the door, was fully dressed already, and she noticed she had been writing a letter at the table. To Marc, no doubt, Nicky thought with a pang of sympathy, telling him all the latest developments. However, Juliet appeared cheerful enough as they drank their grapefruit juice and started on the scrambled eggs and toast they had ordered the night before, and Nicky concluded she had resigned herself to circumstances for the time being at any rate.

Jarratt came to their door while they were still drinking their coffee.

'We'll leave here around eleven o'clock,' he informed them, after enquiring how they had slept. Nicky's pulses leapt at the mere sound of his voice, but she concentrated on pouring herself another cup of coffee and managed to ignore him. 'Do either of you want to come to the hospital with me, or have you more pressing things to do before we leave Alice?'

Juliet raised her eyebrows comically. 'Pressing things—in a town like Alice? You can't mean it! I suppose we can look around the shops, if you call that pressing. I won't come and see Tracy anyhow. But tell her from me I think her boy-friend's beaut.'

'I'll do that,' he said quizzically. 'How about you, Nicky? You haven't met my other sister yet.'

Nicky sought frantically for an excuse for not going and said the first thing that came into her head. 'No, thank you. I—I want to have my hair cut.' And that, she thought when she had said it, was very apt—because wasn't the cutting of hair, in this case, symbolic?

His black eyes roved over her hair and then lingered on her lips.

'Well, it's your decision. But you look good to me just as you are.'

She felt agonised. She wanted to say, 'Don't say things like that to me,' but she turned away and said nothing.

After he had gone, she and Juliet finished their breakfast, Nicky dressed, and they both completed their packing.

'I checked at the office we can leave our bags there,' said Juliet. 'We have to vacate this room by ten.'

Jarry had gone with the car, when they took their bags through to the office, and putting on their sunglasses they both went out into the heat of the sun. Nicky fortunately found ..a hairdresser's where she could have her hair cut straight away, and she arranged to meet Juliet in half an hour's time at Lizzie's Restaurant. Everything went according to plan, and after they had had a drink, they strolled into a shop that sold aboriginal arts and crafts. Nicky was looking through a pile of cards designed and drawn by children at one of the missions when Juliet said with an odd kind of nerviness, 'I'm going to that boutique across the street, Nicky. I think I'll buy a scarf for my mother. I'll—I'll come back and meet you here.'

'Right,' said Nicky agreeably. 'But don't be too long—we don't want to keee Jarratt waiting.'

Soon after Juliet had gone, she selected a couple of cards, paid for them and went into the street, intending to join Juliet in the boutique, but to her amazement, as she looked along the street before crossing over, she saw Juliet getting into a taxi some distance away. Puzzled, she began to run, and as the driver pulled out from the kerb, she signalled to him wildly. By the merest chance, he saw her and pulled up, and she hurried breathlessly towards the cab and looking in the back window at Juliet exclaimed, 'Juliet, what's happened? Were you going without me? We don't need a taxi—we have time to walk.'

'Oh, get in,' Juliet said rather shortly. 'Of course I wasn't going without you. It's getting too hot to be walking around, so when I saw this cab I grabbed it. I was going to pick you up at the shop.'

The taxi was moving again, and somehow Nicky was not entirely convinced by what Juliet said, particularly when, only a few seconds later, she saw they had taken the wrong turning.

'This isn't the way to the motel,' she said slowly.

'Don't *fuss*,' Juliet said irritably. 'The driver knows Alice Springs better than we do.'

Nicky said nothing. The fact was, she knew Alice Springs very well, and in no time she realised with something of a shock that they were heading for Heavitree Gap and the airport!

'We're going to the airport, aren't we?' she asked quietly.

Juliet let out her breath on a deep sigh. 'All right—yes, we are. But don't try to stop me, Nicky, that's all. I'm not going back to Coochin Brim-brim and letting Jarratt order my life. No one can fight him and win, so I'm going while I have the chance. I'm sick of the outback, and Marc won't wait for ever. You do see, don't you?'

Yes, Nicky supposed she saw, but she protested, 'You could have told me instead of just trying to disappear. That wasn't fair. Besides, I could—I could come too.'

Juliet gave her a wry look. 'It just doesn't seem so bad if *someone* stays. I don't care what you say, I don't like leaving Jarratt alone with Catherine. If you were there I'd feel a lot happier.'

Nicky felt appalled. Just herself and Cass! It was going to be impossible. They were nearly at the airport and she wondered wildly what she was going to do. Without Juliet, she had no legitimate

reason for staying. She had even told Jarratt she would go when Juliet did. Leaving him alone with Cass didn't worry her one little bit. In fact it could help things along for. Cass, and maybe one of her wishes would come true. No, she couldn't possibly go back to Coochin Brim-brim...

The taxi pulled up. Juliet opened her handbag to pay the fare, and Nicky asked, 'What about your things—your clothes?'

Juliet shrugged. 'I couldn't care less. I've got plenty more clothes in Adelaide. Freedom's the important thing.' She climbed out of the taxi and turned to Nicky. 'Are you coming in with me? Or shall we say goodbye here? But don't rush back to Jarry and tell on me, will you? He'd quite likely pull a few strings and race out here and drag me off the plane.'

Nicky made a wry face. 'I don't really want to stay without you, Juliet. I think—I think I should go back to Adelaide too.'

'You know, Nicky, this is funny,' said Juliet. 'I had a sort of feeling you were beginning to like Jarry rather specially.'

Nicky said nothing, but inside the airport building she tried to get a seat on the plane, but there were none available. -She didn't know what to do. She was completely disorientated. How could she possibly go back to Coochin Brim-brim without Juliet? It would sound a pretty weak excuse—I couldn't get a seat on the plane.'

She made one more appeal.

'Don't go yet, Juliet. Wait just a few more days. You can't do this to Jarratt.'

'To Jarry? He doesn't need me. This will prove it. And a few days could turn into a few weeks—or even months. *Years*,' said Juliet. 'Jarry can jolly well get married if he needs a woman in the house to

keep him happy.' Her grey-green eyes were determined. 'Don't try to persuade me, Nicky, and don't think I've left you to do all the explaining either. I wrote a note to Jarry this morning, telling him what I was going to do. I left it at the office at the motel. As a matter of fact, it's addressed to you—just to make sure he doesn't get it too soon. You'll be given it when you go in for your luggage. By that time it will be too late to stop me. Anyhow, cheer up—I'm sure you'll enjoy yourself. You're always saying you like the outback, and Catherine is a friend of yours.'

Nicky only half listened. She was wondering if she would be able to get a seat on the plane for tomorrow. It was cowardly in a way. Cass would be upset when she didn't come back, but if Juliet had gone too, she would perhaps understand. She looked at Juliet who had put her in this spot, and bit her lip. Juliet looked so unconcerned—so trim and pretty and determined, in her blue and white skirt, her tailored white blouse with the hand-embroidered collar, her long fair hair caught back from her face.

But now Juliet was beginning to look around her anxiously, almost as if she expected Jarratt to materialise and snatch her away from the very doors of the plane.

'Don't wait, Nicky. Thanks for coming anyhow, and for being so understanding. You were wonderful at Coochin Brim-brim—a natural. I don't know what I'd have done without you. I'll be in touch. If I can't get my mother to let me have enough money for France, I might have to throw myself on your mercy. I'm sure you wouldn't have any trouble persuading your guardian to shell out a few hundred dollars.'

Nicky smiled palely. She could sell some of her opals; it occurred to her she might be needing some money herself. Juliet squeezed her hand. 'Jarry can send my luggage down on the Ghan—or not, as he

chooses. I hope you don't regret having come, Nicky—even if I'm sort of walking out on you.'

'No—oh, no.' The words came automatically.

After they had said a final goodbye, Nicky hurried back to see about making a booking for tomorrow. She wondered if she did regret having come. She had found Cass, and she had found Howard too, and her dreams about him had somehow crumbled into dust. It was probably falling in love with Jarratt Buchan that had done the damage. But to discover that he was playing both Cass and her along—that was the end. It wasn't fair to either of them, particularly as they were friends. If Cass had been a stranger—if Nicky, like Juliet, could have seen her as no more than the children's governess—things might have been different. Then she would have put up a fight—stayed.

Or would she?

No, the idea didn't really appeal to Nicky. If a man were to love her, she wanted it to be a wholehearted passionate love for her alone. Jarratt was looking for a wife. Romantic, passionate love didn't come into it. But by a stroke of luck, two personable and susceptible girls had turned up at his cattle station—and he thought he had the right to make a considered choice. *That* had been the meaning of their dialogue the other night.

Ah well, she thought dolefully as she waited at the counter for attention, she would be gone tomorrow. She was running away. And Jarratt, driven into a corner—a thing that Juliet had said would never happen—would marry 'a girl like Cass'.

She switched off her thoughts abruptly.

She made her booking—she was lucky this time—and managed to get a taxi back to town. She was late already, but she asked the driver

to put her out somewhere in Todd Street some distance from the motel, and then she began to walk slowly, taking her time, so that Juliet would be safely on her way before Jarratt knew what had happened. She was dreading this meeting with Jarratt—being completely alone with him. It was all very well to plan to stay in Alice another night and leave for Adelaide tomorrow, but Jarrat wouldn't let her get away with it that easily, and she knew she was going to have trouble standing up to him. He could be quite terrifyingly forceful, and in a way she didn't blame Juliet for sneaking off as she had.

As she turned the corner into the street where the motel was, she saw that Jarratt's car was already there, and in another few seconds, she saw him come out of the motel carrying the luggage she and Juliet had left at the office. She felt herself begin to tense. He hadn't seen her, and had opened the car door to put the luggage in. 'I'll tell him straight away,' she decided. 'I'll simply say, You can take my bag out of the car, Jarratt. I'm not going to Coochin Brim-brim.'

The words were waiting on her lips as unconsciously she began to hurry to get it over, and then she saw that there was someone else in the car—and that it was Max Bonney.

She knew a sense of relief. Jarratt would hardly be likely to have a row with her in front of Tracy's boy-friend. There would be nothing for him to do but allow her to do as she wished.

CHAPTER NINE

'OH, there you are Nicky,' Jarratt said pleasantly.

He had turned to face her, and she felt herself weaken as she looked back at him. He had become so familiar with his broad shoulders and narrow hips, and that wild-looking dark hair that could do with a good trim, and she couldn't take her eyes off him. Everything she had planned to say seemed to have gone clean out of her head, and she simply stood staring.

'I was wondering what had happened to you two girls,' he resumed, 'particularly as I was handed a letter for you at the office which I suspect is from my young sister.' He fished it out of the pocket of his black and white striped shirt as he spoke and handed it to her, and she took it with a feeling of helplessness. Max Bonney had got out of the car and was smiling a greeting at her, and Jarratt explained, 'Max is coming to stay with us for a couple of nights. He's anxious to meet Marcie-Ann and Medora before he leaves for Adelaide.'

'Oh.' Nicky looked at Max rather wildly. She had no idea what to say. Everything seemed so ordinary.

Jarratt narrowed his eyes in the bright sunlight. "Is Juliet far behind you? Or did you girls split up?"

'We—we split up,' she stammered. 'Is there—have we left anything in the motel?'

'I don't think so. Two pieces of luggage—that's right, isn't it? The only thing missing appears to be my young sister.' He grinned wryly at Max. 'Maybe you already know, but neither of my sisters is particularly keen on the outback, Max. Tracy makes the best of it and accedes to my demands, but I'm afraid Juliet would disappear at the drop of a hat.' He gave Nicky a sharp look. 'You'd better open that letter. Do you know where Juliet is?'

'Yes,' said Nicky resignedly, realising he was beginning to suspect the truth now. 'She decided to—to go home.' She looked at Max Bonney apologetically. 'She didn't want to stay indefinitely, and after all she has her own life to lead, she--'

'Oh, don't start pleading her case,' Jarratt interrupted, his mouth grim. 'She's gone on the plane, I gather. Without a word to me.'

'Not—not really,' said Nicky. She tore open the envelope she was holding and extracted the folded sheet of paper enclosed. It had Jarratt's name scrawled across it in Juliet's rather immature hand. 'She wrote you this letter.'

Max, aware that a family crisis was in the air, had discreetly moved away and was standing in the shade of a white cedar, lighting a cigarette.

Jarratt said, 'I'm surprised after our discussion last night that you're still here, Nicky. You told me you'd leave when Juliet did, remember? I'm glad you've changed your mind about that.' He smiled slightly, and she closed her eyes.

'I didn't change my mind.' She had to force herself to say it, and she hated the whole situation. How different it all would have been if Cass hadn't been so much in love with him—if he hadn't stirred both of them up—if he had contented himself with one girl! 'I would have gone,' Nicky told him, 'but the plane was full up. I'm—I'm going tomorrow.'

His head was bent as he read Juliet's note, and she saw a variety of expressions cross his face—annoyance, amusement—and finally anger. But the anger, she discovered, was for her, for now he looked up and his black eyes blazed at her.

'You're going tomorrow. Just like that.'

'Yes,' she quavered. 'I'll—I'll stay another night at the motel--'

'Will you!' he exclaimed savagely. He stuffed the sheet of notepaper into his trouser pocket. 'I'll tell you the contents of that letter later on, but right now—he took her violently by the arm in a grip that hurt—'right now, you're getting into that car and you're coming out to Coochin Brim-brim. I'm prepared to use physical force if necessary, Rainbow,' he threatened as she tried to pull away from him. 'I'd act civilised and stay in town another night myself if I could—we have unfinished business, remember?—but I'm obliged to take Max Bonney home and introduce him to Tracy's children. So you'll come along too.'

Nicky was white and shaken. She didn't doubt that he would carry out his threat if she tried to escape him, and she didn't fancy being picked up bodily and forced into his car in front of Max Bonney and anyone else who happened to be passing. Already his fingers were bruising her arm and he was urging her across the footpath. She stammered out angrily, 'I've booked my seat on the plane, Mr Buchan—you'll have to bring me back to town tomorrow.'

'Don't *Mr Buchan* me,' he snapped. 'And don't tell me what I'll *have* to do either. You can come into the motel with me now and we'll ring through and cancel your booking.'

Tight-lipped, she let him propel her towards the hotel. Juliet had been right when she had said he was a brute—and that he never hesitated to twist an arm. He was twisting hers right now—literally.

She said under her breath, 'You have a hide—treating me like this!' She glanced uneasily at Max Bonney, some yards off, smoking his cigarette and pretending that nothing was happening though she was sure he must be curious.

'Yes, I do have a hide, don't I?' he returned, also under his breath. 'I'm afraid you're going to learn I'm not the type of male to be got rid of so easily. I live too far away from civilisation to get my priorities mixed.' He called out to Max, 'We shan't be a moment, Max. Nicky has to make a phone call.'

'I don't have to make a phone call at all,' said Nicky—but she said it to Jarratt, not to Max. 'Why should I do what you say? I—I don't want to go back to Coochin Brim-brim.'

'You're coming all the same. I need someone to cook dinner for my guest,' he added with an unkind smile.

'Cass can do that.'

'Catherine is a camp cook. You have the Cordon Bleu touch.'

It wasn't Nicky who made the phone call eventually, it was Jarratt. And he didn't alter her booking, he quite simply cancelled it. Nicky had never felt so helpless, and she was almost speechless with rage. Yet she was frightened too. Why was he acting this way? She knew very well it wasn't because he wanted someone to cook the dinner. Cass wasn't a camp cook, and she wouldn't be surprised if Jarratt himself could cook. He was the sort of man who could turn his hand to anything. So why was he insisting on taking her back to Coochin Brim-brim?

There was only one answer to that question, and she was afraid to voice it even to herself. The fact that it was there lurking at the back of her mind was enough to make her feel sick. She—she *couldn't* do this to Cass.

As they went back to the car she said pathetically, 'Jarratt—please, *please* let me go.'

He ignored her.

On the way out of town he stopped at the post office. 'I'll pick up the mail before we go home. Will you come in with me, Nicky?'

It wasn't really a question. She knew it was an order. He thought she might run away if he left her for a moment. Wearily, she climbed out and followed him. Among the letters he collected, there was one for her, from Guy, and a letter for Cass from Howard.

'Howard hasn't written to you, I'm afraid, Rainbow.'

'Don't call me that,' she said, quivering, then turned away because he was aware of it and a smile lurked on his lips.

'Let's hear what your guardian has to say before we go back to the car.'

'I don't want to read my letter yet,' said Nicky obstinately.

'Well, I want to know what he has to say.' Jarratt was equally obstinate. 'Come on now—open it and let's have the gist of it. Or shall I do it for you?'

Nicky twisted away from his grip. 'I—I hate you, Jarratt Buchan!'

'No, you don't,' he retorted.

Nicky scanned the letter rapidly.

'Guy will be back next week. And he's coming to fetch me if I'm not back in Adelaide,' she finished triumphantly.

He didn't comment, and in another minute they were back in the car.

Nicky had a lot of time for thinking during the drive. Max sat in front with Jarry and she sat in the back. Max, she gathered from snippets of conversation she heard, had never been north of Alice Springs, but he

was interested in the country, and interested to see where his beloved came from. He was, as well, a little anxious about the children. It was important that he should make contact with them and that they should like him. He talked a great deal about Tracy, and Nicky ceased to listen, and looking out at the passing scenery, she felt against all reason that she was coming home.

Later they stopped at Red Lily for petrol. Mr Capper was still not better, but Shirley was in attendance, though a little of her bounce seemed to have gone.

'We're going to have to get a man in to manage the place,' she told Jarry, and when they were on their way again he remarked for Nicky's benefit, 'That's a job Howard Johnston could take on. There'd be some future for him there, if he wants a place where he'd be boss.'

Nicky said involuntarily, 'His father used to run Red Lily.'

'I'm aware of that—Catherine told me not so long ago. I remember the Johnstons, as a matter of fact.'

Nicky, thinking of that coarse, impatient woman who had answered the telephone when she had rung Darwin, said quickly, 'Mrs Johnston was only their stepmother. Their own mother was—was a very nice woman.'

'You've met her, have you?' he asked, his voice courteous. But from the mockery in the black eyes she encountered in the rear-vision mirror, she knew he realised she had never met Cass's mother—who had died before her husband came to Red Lily.

'Nicky used to live out this way,' Jarry told Max Bonney conversationally. 'She went to school with Juliet, but she's an outback girl at heart as well as by birth.'

'Oh no,' Nicky exclaimed, 'Jarratt's joking, Mr Bonney! I've lived in Adelaide so long now I—I belong there.'

'Never,' said Jarratt emphatically.

When they left the Bitumen, it was burning hot and out on the horizon mirages of trees floated on non-existent lakes that shimmered silver and blue. The spinifex looked like velvet, the red rocks glowed with colour and the shadows were purple. Dark groves of mulgas appeared and here and there cattle sheltered in the shade of the beautiful desert oaks with their drooping feathery branches. To Nicky, it was all so superb that it amazed her to hear Max Bonney remark thoughtfully, 'You've a cruel-looking country here in the Centre.'

'But it's beautiful!' Nicky exclaimed without thinking, then stopped, embarrassed.

'It is indeed,' Jarratt agreed. 'The more so as we've had a succession of good seasons. The aborigines prefer dust and red earth, but I'll settle very happily for this mantle of vegetation we've been blessed with. I'm particularly happy it's been so attractive while Nicky and Juliet were here. I warn you, Max—Tracy will want to come back. She doesn't know it herself yet, but it will happen. You'll have to bring her and the children here for a holiday now and again. Once you've learned to love this land, you're faithful to it for ever. Nicky protests she belongs in Adelaide, but don't you believe it! Utter one word of criticism—as you did—and she'll spring to its defence as if she were a tiger defending her young. That's a sure sign she's lost her heart.'

Nicky didn't protest any more. She caught the glitter of Jarratt's black eyes in the mirror as he moved his head deliberately so that he could see her, and she shifted along the seat and refused to look at him.

Red dust rose around the car presently as they went through a particularly bad patch of bull dust, and Jarratt said apologetically, 'I'm

sorry about that. This side road will never be sealed—not in my lifetime—and the dust is something we just have to put up with. But by the way, Nicky, I'm having an air-conditioner fitted to the car shortly. That will make for much more pleasant travelling.'

Nicky wanted to ask, 'What's that to do with me? I'm leaving,' but before she had quite made up her mind whether or not to speak Max remarked, wiping the dust and perspiration from his face, 'I'm surprised you haven't done that before.'

'Oh, I'm used to roughing it, but women deserve a little pampering when they have outback.'

'Sounds as if you're thinking of getting married,' said Max.

'With Tracy deserting me, I shall have to,' agreed Jarratt blandly.

Nicky tossed up whether or not she'd say something about Cass, because she had an uneasy suspicion that Max thought *she* was to be the lucky girl. She decided on silence, but held her breath. Surely Jarratt wouldn't say anything that would put her on the spot?

He didn't, but he started talking about Catherine. So what did *that* indicate?

'You'll like the girl who's looking after Marcie-Ann and Medora. She's a natural with children, and charming as well. If she had the qualifications, she'd be all set for a happy career as a teacher. As a matter of fact, she's studying now with that in mind.'

Nicky stopped listening.

When at last they reached the homestead, Catherine was in the garden with the children, who looked cute and cool in cotton shorts and matching T-shirts, Marcie-Ann's blue, Medora's red, and Nicky could see at once that Max was charmed with them. As Jarratt, Max and

Nicky came into the garden and Cass saw them, a lovely colour stained her round face, and she flipped her hair behind her ears and sent Jarratt her gentle wide-eyed smile. Nicky felt a strange pain in her heart. Poor darling Cass, who had always wanted the impossible. But this time, what she wanted wasn't impossible, Nicky was convinced of it.

Jarratt introduced her to Max—as a friend of Tracy's—the children were presented, and they all went inside in a leisurely way. Jarratt had said nothing to Cass about Juliet, and she hadn't asked about Howard, taking it for granted, Nicky presumed, that he had got out of the car and gone straight over to the bungalow.

Inside, Nicky excused herself and went straight to her room. She had no intention of playing the hostess now that Juliet had gone. Jarratt would have to make his own arrangements about dinner and a room for Max, it was nothing to do with her.

She was in the process of changing out of her dust-stained clothes when there was a knock at the door and Cass asked, 'Nicky, may I come in?'

'Of course.'

Cass came in and flopped down in one of the armchairs and looked at Nicky ruefully. 'Did you get a letter from Howdie too? Isn't he awful?'

Nicky shook her head. 'I haven't heard a thing, except that I know he's not in Ahce. What's happened?'

'Oh, he's gone to Coober Pedy! He reckons he's going to shift there and mine for opals as soon as he's fit again. It's just too bad of him to go away like that. Oh, Nicky, I feel so awful! What about you? And whatever put such an idea into his head?'

'Don't worry about me, Cass,' Nicky said wryly. She slipped into the silky shnky gown she had bought under Claudia's guidance, and heard Jarratt's voice telling her not to bring that along to the muster camp. It seemed an eternity had passed since that night! 'I suppose Howdie had been thinking what I told him about Jack. There's a fortune to be made at Coober Pedy—if you're lucky. I guess Howdie feels it's worth while giving it a go, while he has no responsibilities.'

'He could have waited,' said Cass. 'He could have come back here first. He can't start anything with a broken collar-bone. He should have talked it over with us—with you—'

Nicky sighed. 'Cass, Howdie has to make his own decisions. He knows you're—you're in good hands. And he doesn't have to talk anything over with me, you know.'

Cass's face fell. 'I think he should,' she persisted. 'Oh, doesn't everything seem to have gone wrong all of a sudden? Will you still be here when he comes back for his things? He's asked me to tell Jarry he's not coming back to work here again.'

'No, I won't be here,' said Nicky positively. 'Juliet's gone to Adelaide. Did Jarratt tell you?'

'No,' Cass looked puzzled.

'She doesn't really like it here,' Nicky said uncomfortably.

'But you came back,' Cass said thoughtfully, and Nicky turned away from the look in her eyes.

'Yes, because—well, Juliet just made up her mind to go all of a sudden. I'd left all my things here, and I wanted to see you again before I went.'

'And Howard?' asked Cass warily.

Nicky sighed. She couldn't pretend to a feeling for Howard that she no longer had. 'If Howard really wants to, he can look me up in Adelaide, can't he? You just can't arrange other people's lives for them, Cass, no matter how fond of them you are.'

Cass said slowly, 'I don't think you care terribly about Howdie after all, do you, Nicky? And I was so sure you two would fall in love—I thought you *had*. I was so looking forward to him coming back and the three of us being together again, like old times. And then there was only that man, Max Bonney ... Who exactly is he? Jarry seemed to want the children to go along with them just now.'

Nicky, relieved that her relationship with Howard was no longer the main topic of conversation, explained, 'He's a very special friend of Tracy's. She's going to Adelaide to stay with his parents for a while when she leaves hospital. The children will stay here, so she wanted him to meet them while he had the opportunity.'

Cass turned that over in her mind. 'You mean that Tracy's going to marry again, don't you?'

'It seems like it,' agreed Nicky.

'So she'll go—and the children. I won't be needed. Jarry will be on his own. Oh, Nicky, I hate to think of him here with just Lena to look after him! Even Lewis is going at the end of the year. There'll only be the stockmen. It will be such a lonely life for him—so stark! He needs a wife—a family--'

'Well then,' said Nicky, forcing a smile, 'what are you worrying about? If he needs a wife--' She paused and Cass looked back at her tearfully.

'It's no good looking at me like that, Nicky. He's never said anything to me—never! Oh, I wish I hadn't said I wanted to be a teacher when Howdie and I first came here! I wish I'd had the sense to keep quiet. But he did ask a lot of questions and—I just talked, I guess. Sometimes I have the feeling he doesn't say anything because of that. He thinks I should have the chance of a career. It was important to me once—but not now.'

'Then tell him so, Cass,' said Nicky firmly. 'It shouldn't be all that difficult. Look, I'd better have my shower and change. Will you do something about dinner, or are you going to leave it to Lena?'

Cass smiled reluctantly. 'I couldn't do that! I'll see you later, Nicky.' She went off to the kitchen and Nicky, relieved to have that ordeal over, breathed a sigh of relief. She was quite sure that Cass would produce a dinner that would prove she was no camp cook!

The children ate with the adults that night, and behaved themselves very creditably. Max had brought small gifts for them, he casually mentioned their mother now and again, and though he didn't force it, he certainly won their confidence, because Marcie-Ann asked him if he would tell them a story when they were in bed. While he was doing that, the others sat on the verandah, the girls with coffee, Jarratt with a glass of port.

'What did Howard have to say for himself?' he asked Cass.

'He's gone to Coober Pedy,' said Cass wryly. 'He thought he'd investigate what the chances are there for making some money.'

'Good lord!' Jarratt was evidently surprised. 'What gave him that idea? Is he coming back here to work?'

'No,' admitted Cass. 'I'm sorry, Jarry. He asked me to let you know. I hope it won't put you out.'

'I guess I'll get by,' Jarratt said ironically. 'It certainly looks as if everyone's making surprise decisions, doesn't it? Nicky will have told you about Juliet—and about Tracy's plans.'

'Yes.' Cass sounded subdued.

'The children will be gone before Christmas, if Max has his way. How's the study going, by the way?'

'I've been—battling on.' Cass glanced at Nicky, then said hurriedly, 'I don't know if I'll pass my exams, though. I—I might never get to teachers' college.' She added with an obvious effort, 'I won't really mind if I don't.'

Jarratt raised his dark eyebrows. 'Now that's nonsense, of course you'll get there. You've got plenty of brains.'

Listening, Nicky writhed. He is callous, she thought. He'd led Cass on—he must have—and now he sounded as if all he wanted was to see her go off to teachers' college. Worse still, he now told her, 'Don't feel you have to stay around socialising any longer now, Catherine. Nicky can kiss the girls goodnight. You're quite free to run off and do your study—your exams aren't all that far off. And by the way,' he added as she rose, her face turned away from him, away from Nicky, 'if you need any help, ask Lewis, will you? I have a guest to entertain.'

Cass went straight away, even though she hadn't finished her coffee, and Nicky felt herself boiling with anger. She got to her feet too and would have followed Cass except that Jarratt caught hold of her arm quite savagely and told her, 'Wait on, Nicky. You and I have several things to talk about.'

'I don't think so,' she said angrily.

'Oh yes, we have.' His eyes glittered with a sudden devilishness. 'There was something in Juliet's letter that concerned you. She

suggested I should find myself a wife and she named you as the most likely contender. So how about it, Rainbow? Will you marry me?'

Nicky stared at him. She couldn't believe her ears. She felt the colour leave her face, and she felt both infuriated and utterly knocked out. What a colossal impudence he had! 'How about it, Rainbow?' She didn't even know if he meant it. The awful thing was that she *would* marry him—but for Cass. Yes, no matter how casual, how unprincipled his proposal, she would have said Yes in a flash—and granted him all the rights. But for Cass.

She looked into the dark mystery of his eyes and felt herself shiver right through to her very soul as she said coolly—oh, so coolly!—'Of course I won't. You must be mad. Guy Sonder is coming to fetch me home in a few days—if I'm still here.'

He stared back at her for a long moment, and then he said, as cool as herself, 'You're certainly a girl with a man for all seasons, aren't you? Guy Sonder—young Johnston— me. That's quite a list for a girl of nineteen, isn't it? Three men. Though I'm none too sure that Howard's amorous intentions towards you would be quite as clear-cut as mine—or Sonder's.'

To her infinite relief, Max came out to join them then, and she was quick to take the opportunity to excuse herself and go to her room. She said goodnight to both men, and as she turned away Jarratt said, coolly pleasant, 'Don't tuck yourself down yet, Nicky. Get your stuff unpacked if that's what's on your mind, and I'll see you about that matter we were discussing later on.'

Nicky didn't answer. If he thought she was going to stay up half the night waiting to be outwitted by him, he was wrong! She would go to bed and she would be asleep when he came to her door. Or if she wasn't asleep then she would pretend to be. There were going to be no

more talks, no more discussions, between Jarratt Buchan and Rainbow Reay.

All the same, she didn't go to bed immediately. She put on the reading light, then went to stand and look out at the darkness of the night, filled with unrest and a terrible longing. She would give anything—anything—to be able to stay here. To be Jarratt's wife—to He in his arms at night—to have the right to call him her husband and Coochin Brim- brim home. To bring up her children—hers and Jarratt's— here. Yes, she would give anything. But she wouldn't betray Cass.

The only sane thing to do take his absurd proposal at its face value—a mere piece of expediency—and to point him to Cass. The crazy thing was that, if Cass knew how she felt, she would step back and leave the field to Nicky. So Cass mustn't know. What was unforgivable was Jarratt's behaviour in creating the situation. He was utterly unscrupulous—he didn't care if he broke Cass's heart. And Cass, as Nicky had reminded herself more than once, had been here first. She, Nicky, was the intruder. It was for her to go.

It was terrible to have to reason and reason with herself as she was doing, and she didn't know how long she stood staring into the darkness. But finally she turned back into the room, dashing away the tears she discovered had wet her cheeks. She had stripped off her clothes and was groping blindly for her pyjamas when the door was suddenly flung open and Jarratt stepped inside. He shut the door behind him and stood with his back against it.

After an instant during which she stood petrified, her face first scarlet, then dead white. Nicky dragged the sheet from her bed and draped it around her. She stood quivering, outraged, unable to speak. She wanted to ask, 'How *dare* you?' but the funny thing was she had the feeling he hadn't even noticed she was naked. There was nothing but a sort of deadly determination in his eyes as he looked at her. He

stood with his hands on his narrow hips. The three top buttons of the black and white shirt he still wore were unfastened, and he looked utterly tough, utterly wild—a hard, brutal, uncivilised man of the Never-Never. Yet as she stood clutching the sheet around her naked body, she felt strangely small-minded. Conventions seemed no longer to be of any importance. The only thing that mattered was truth. Or was it love? She saw it in his eyes, but she hadn't yet learned to read it.

He said with a tight-lipped smile, 'The end of the world hasn't come. I have other things on my mind besides seduction. You're well covered up now, if it's a comfort to you, but I warned you, didn't I, not to go to bed—that I was coming to talk to you.'

She swallowed down her shock, but when she spoke her voice shook. 'You don't have the right to tell me what to do. What—what do you want?'

Now the fire, the warmth, the hot disturbing element came back into his eyes and he moved indolently forward.

'You might be shocked if I told you.'

She was shocked already, and distinctly disconcerted to see a spark of amusement in the blackness of his eyes.

'But quite apart from that,' he said, 'I'd like to know if you asked Guy Sonder to come and get you.'

'No—yes,' she stammered, taken off her guard. She drew the sheet around her where it was slipping from one shoulder. 'He—he said in his letter--'

'I know what he said in his letter. You've already told me that. I want to know if it was in answer to what you wrote to him. Did you ask him to come and take you away? Am I making myself clear?'

She shook her head wildly, feeling her heart leap in fright. 'I don't see that it matters to you.'

'Don't you?' He sounded almost threatening. 'Have you forgotten already what I asked you tonight before we were interrupted?'

She turned away from him abruptly. 'Oh, that! You were being—ridiculous. I—I didn't take any notice of that. I'd rather forget it.'

'Do you mean that?' His voice was close behind her and she could feel the heat of his breath on her neck.

'Yes,' she said in a whisper.

'If I took you in my arms now you wouldn't want to forget it.'

Nicky stiffened. 'Don't—don't touch me!' Her heart was pounding and her voice was husky. He cupped his hands over her bare shoulders. 'Please--' she said shakily.

'Then tell me why,' he said quietly.

'Because—because I didn't come here to stay. I came while Juliet was here, that's all.'

'So what's that to do with it?' To her relief, Jarratt's hands fell from her shoulders, but she stayed with her back to him. Her breathing was disturbed and her mouth was trembling. These things she didn't want him to see. 'It wouldn't be the first love affair to start that way,' he said reasonably.

'Love affair? She shook her head almost imperceptibly. 'There's no—love affair,' she got out. 'I'm not interested, I told you. You have—you have Cass.'

'I don't "have" Cass,' he retorted, 'whatever you mean by that. Catherine is my nieces' governess. Do you imagine she's my mistress as well?'

'No, of course not! Cass wouldn't--'

'And neither would I. Catherine and I haven't been here alone—I've never wanted it that way. Do you think I asked Juliet here solely to attend to my creature comforts? Especially when I know very well she's neither interested in, nor capable of doing, that?'

'How should I know?' Nicky was beginning to feel weak and very much afraid that if he didn't go soon, something drastic would happen. She badly wanted time to herself—time to think. He had been telling her, she supposed, that marriage with Cass had never entered his mind. But she couldn't quite believe that. He *had* encouraged Cass. He had stirred her up—doubtless in the same way that he had stirred her, Nicky, up with his kisses, his lovemaking, with his particular way of looking at a woman. She was convinced..that if she had never come here, then Cass would have been the obvious choice when he needed a wife.

She said again, 'Please—leave me alone, Jarratt. I'm—I'm tired. I can't—think.'

'Then tomorrow,' he said after a moment, and the very sound of his voice stirred her senses.

She nodded, and stayed where she was, and then he moved and she heard the soft click of the door as it shut behind him. She knew from the sudden weakness of her limbs how much she had wanted him to take her in his arms—how much she had wanted to feel the wild thrill of his lips on hers, the rising excitement as her soft body yielded to the hardness of his—the delight of surrendering to him completely—the right to say, 'I love you, Jarratt'.

The temptation to confess to Cass was almost intolerable. Because Cass would say, 'Go ahead—it was just another impossible wish on my part'. And inside, Cass would feel as she was feeling now...

The following day, they all went to the gorge for a picnic. Jarratt drove the station wagon, and Max and Medora, who had taken a fancy to the man she didn't know yet was going to marry her mother, sat in front, while Cass and Nicky and Marcie-Ann sat in the back. As he drove, Jarratt talked to Max about his two-and-a-half-thousand-square-mile property, about the problems of beef raising here, about his Shorthorns and the herd of Droughtmaster cattle he was breeding—hump-backed, Brahmin-based, more suited to the climate of the Centre than the British breeds.

'My God, it's a hungry-looking country,' Max remarked, and this time Nicky didn't utter her protests aloud. To her it was so beautiful it brought tears to her eyes, and she had to turn her head to hide them from Cass. Soon she would be leaving—tomorrow, when Max went—never to see any of it again. She stared through a blur of tears at the dark mulgas that dotted the gently undulating plain and massed into groves in the contours. Beneath them the earth was rose-red, splashed over with the golden fire of the yellow tops and the rich purple flowers of the wild tomato. Beyond the mulgas was witchetty bush country, where the trees still carried chrome yellow flower spikes, and Jarratt told Max that these were the trees in which the aborigines found the delectable witchetty grubs.

'Delectable?' asked Max on a laugh.

Nicky caught Jarry's eyes in the mirror. He turned his head slightly. 'What would you girls say to that?' Cass gave a shudder. 'I've never tried them and I don't want to, thank you.'

'What about you, Nicky?' Jarratt asked quizzically.

Nicky's cheeks burned. She said, evading a direct answer, 'I believe these days they're offered as a delicacy to tourists who're interested in ethnic food. Grilled over coals or fried in butter--'

'And very nice too,' said Jarry with a grin.

In the cool shadows of the gorge against whose high red walls the white powdery trunks of ghost gums showed fantastic and unreal, they stopped. The children left the station wagon and scampered eagerly across the wide flat bed of the river to the pools that lay reflecting the cloudless blue of the sky, and there they paddled until they were called to lunch. While Cass and Nicky unpacked the food, Jarratt built a small fire to boil the billy—'It's not a picnic without billy tea,' he told Max, who grinned and wandered off to accompany the children on their tour of discovery. It wasn't often they came as far from the homestead, and they found everything wonderful and exciting.

Lunch was simple—cold roast beef with plenty of salad vegetables and fruit, and fresh orange juice for the children while the adults drank their slightly smoky, scalding tea. Nicky was quiet and dreamy, filled with a painful delight, thinking that she would remember this day—this last day—for ever more. She would always see Jarratt, in her mind's eye, against this background that was so much a part of him.

The steep rock walls towered against a sky whose colours ranged from deep cobalt to palest cerulean. Water glinted, birds alighted high up on the rocks where trees clung, their roots half exposed, holding on so precariously yet so fearlessly, 'it seemed. Nicky caught Jarry's eyes on her occasionally and wondered uneasily what he was planning, for she knew he wouldn't be content to leave her alone all day.

When lunch was over, the litter cleared away, the camp- fire extinguished, they all took a leisurely walk through the gorge. Deliberately, Nicky kept with the children, and by doing so found herself in Max's company, while Cass and Jarratt lingered a little way behind. Nicky didn't look back once to see what Jarratt and Cass were doing. She pointed out to the children the wild orange flowers with their long silky stamens, the green pussy tails that grew in the river sand, their honey scent sweet on the still air, and when Marcie-Ann found a patch of pale pink spidery flowers, it was she who told her they were Sandover lilies.

'You know your outback flowers,' Max commented, and Nicky reflected that this was knowledge that had surfaced from back in her Alice Springs days—some of it possibly from even before that. Max asked her various questions about herself, and though she answered them she heard them only with the top of her mind. More than anything, she was aware of Cass and Jarratt walking so slowly behind, talking to each other—of what?

When they returned from their walk to get into their swimming gear and cool off in one of the bigger pools, the grouping arrangement was altered. When Nicky, taking hold of a child by each hand, would have gone across the sand to the water with them, but Jarratt intervened.

'You've had your turn with the children, Nicky. Catherine, Max will give you a hand.'

Max, in trunks, had gone ahead and Cass, her head slightly lowered, her cheeks flushed, went away with the children who had dropped Nicky's hands and run to her the moment Jarry issued his order—for order it had been.

Jarratt was lounging against a flat rock, his torso bare above the swimming trunks he wore, his dark eyes disconcerting. Nicky stood

uncertainly, then with sudden decision she told him, 'I'm going to take a swim too—it's so hot.'

'In a moment,' he said sharply. His eyes, were on her and she was suddenly aware of her figure in the revealing bikini. She almost wished there were a sheet handy to snatch up as she had done last night, and cover her nakedness. Because now Jarry *was* conscious of her nearly naked body. There was none of that harsh determination in his expression that showed he was concentrating on a single thing. Instead, she saw that warm sexy look in his eyes that frightened her somuch, and so excitingly, and with a little groan that she hoped he didn't hear, she dropped down on to the towel she had left lying on the ground, her face averted from him. Her heart was hammering madly. Oh God, why did he have to look at her that way? She shrank within herself, yet at the same time a fire ran through her veins.

He left his rock and came to sit near her on the ground, sprawling back on one hand, his face far too close to hers. She hugged her knees and knew from the curling of his hp that he read all sorts of things into her defensive posture.

He said, coming straight to the point, 'Well, what about it, Rainbow? That proposition I put to you last night. Are you going to marry me?'

She caught her breath and glanced towards the pool where the others were swimming, but of course they could not possibly have heard him.

'I told you—no,' she said indistinctly.

He reached out and put a finger on her lips. 'You don't mean that,' he murmured. His finger moved, tracing the outline of her mouth, then feathered over her chin and down her throat, and before she was aware of it he had leaned towards her and his lips had touched hers. She drew away from him swiftly, a long shiver going through her

body. Her guilty eyes flew to the small group in the water, and she knew Cass had seen. She was shading her eyes, looking towards them. Nicky could have died.

'Don't touch me,' she gasped. She scrambled to her feet and stood for a moment feeling dizzy. Then before she could speed away as she had meant to do, Jarratt was on his feet too and his fingers had circled her wrist, making her a prisoner, and his eyes were looking compellingly into hers.

'Let me go,' she whispered. 'It's no use. I'm—I'm leaving tomorrow with Max. You can't stop me. And—and if you try, Guy will come for me.' She turned her head resolutely away from that look in his eyes and asked brokenly, 'Why don't you marry Cass?'

CHAPTER TEN

JARRATT said nothing for a long moment, then—'Get some clothes on, Rainbow. We're going to talk. After that, if you still want to go—as you say, I can't stop you.'

Nicky was shivering, but certainly not with cold. She felt very naked in her bikini and she would be only too glad to get her clothes on, and the minute he released her she went to the little group of twisted corkwood trees where she had changed, and pulled on her jeans and her shirt and her sandals. When she emerged, Jarratt, though still shirtless, was in dark cotton trousers and sandals. In the water the children were splashing and squealing, and Cass was standing a little apart, her head bent. Nicky's heart ached for her.

Jarratt took a firm grip on her arm. 'We'll find a quiet place and say all the things that should have been said long before this,' he told her.

'We can talk here,' she said pathetically. 'If we go away, Cass will—will--'

'For God's sake,' he exclaimed with controlled violence, 'what has Catherine Johnston to do with this thing between you and me?'

She blinked, her nerves shattered. 'I've told you—Cass is my friend.'

'So what? And you've told me nothing. Now come along, I have no intention of standing here in full view of the company where we're liable to be interrupted at any moment—though I don't mean by Catherine, I credit *her* with having some tact.'

Nicky, her feet planted firmly apart on the ground, didn't move. 'We can talk here,' she said stubbornly.

'If you continue to take that attitude, Rainbow,' he said, his mouth twisting in a sardonic smile, 'then one of two things is likely to happen.'

'What?' she asked involuntarily.

'Either I shall ravish you here in full sight of anyone who happens to look, or I shall pick you up bodily and carry you off into the bush.'

'All right, I'll—I'll come,' she said hurriedly, her cheeks paling.

He put his hand under her elbow and they walked on into the gorge in the shadow of the high red rock walls. They walked slowly, but in no time at all they were out of sight of others, and quite alone, moving through the long pink and silver grasses and the tangle of yellowtop daisies, through the wild figs and bloodwoods until at last, in a cleared space where a yellow-flowered tree had spread a carpet of long narrow leaves on the ground, Jarratt decided they had gone far enough.

'This is—silly,' Nicky began to protest, but anything more she might have said was stifled as his arms went around her and she was crushed against him, and he was kissing and kissing her. The world spun. It was a kaleidoscope of blue sky and red rock and yellow flowers, and with a feeling of complete helplessness, Nicky gave way to her senses. She let him kiss her throat, her shoulders, her eyelids, and then he held her palm against his lips and told her hoarsely, 'Oh God, I want you—I need you, Rainbow--'

'I—I can't,' she said brokenly.

'You can,' he said. Somehow or other they had both slipped to the ground and she was half lying on the thick carpet of leaves and leaning against his naked chest, feeling the steady thumping of his heart.

'But—*Cass*. I shouldn't,' she whispered.

She felt his chest move in a long sigh.

'You're intent on talking about Catherine, aren't you? Well, fook—I've just been talking to Cass, as you call her. Cass knows what's happening. I've known all along she fancied herself in love with me. She's a romantic girl, and it's a common enough reaction when you're often in the company of one man. If I were already married, or considerably older, she'd most likely have looked another way and possibly have fallen in love with Lewis Trent.' Nicky listened, silent but doubtful, her cheek against the warmth of his bare skin—where she still thought it had no right to be.

'Catherine's propensity to lose her heart was one reason why I asked Juliet to come here,' he continued. 'At least it lessened the danger of Catherine's becoming too—proprietorial, even in her mind. And you came along too, didn't you? The surprise package.' He took Nicky's chin in his hand and turned her face up to his. 'Rainbow, I give you my soelmn word that I have never given Catherine one word of encouragement—never once touched her, taken her in my arms, kissed her. Never deliberately played on her senses in any way, not even by making the slightest suggestion of verbal love. If she's built up a romance, it's on a foundation of daydreams, and she'll soon get over it. That will be natural too. The children will be gone soon—Tracy will want them with her in Adelaide. And Lewis is leaving in less than a month. He's a guy with a big and generous heart, and he's already offered to keep an eye on Catherine if she goes to the city. She'll be all right.'

Poor Cass, thought Nicky. Blue eyes, flying, and love—not one of her wishes granted, not yet. As if she had said it aloud, Jarratt reminded her, 'Catherine is not yet twenty. Remember I told you once that your discoveries were still ahead of you? Well, so are Cass's.' Once more his lips touched hers and he murmured against them, 'But

I like to think your big discoveries are under way right now. Are you going to admit it?"

'Yes,' breathed Nicky. There seemed nothing else to say, and in the light of what he had said about his relationship with Cass, then denying her own heart was not going to do anyone any good...

She let him kiss her, hold her, make love to her, but finally she drew away to ask him something that was troubling her.

'Jarratt, is it because of Cass's background—because her family are ordinary people—that you weren't interested in her? Because I--'

His dark eyes, still smouldering with a desire he had managed to keep in check, sharpened slightly. 'You—what, Rainbow? Don't tell me you want to talk about yourself at last, after all the questions you've parried—refused to answer.'

She bit her lip. 'I'll have to, because--But is it because of that that you didn't fall in love with Cass? Juliet said you'd never—never marry beneath you.'

'My God! Did she? What a thing to say!' She had never seen him look so furious. 'What was all this sort of talk about, anyhow?'

'It doesn't matter,' she said hurriedly. 'It was just—we were talking about—people--'

'If I were in love with Catherine Johnston,' Jarratt said slowly, 'then make no mistake about it—I would marry her no matter what her background was. But as it happens, there's nothing in the least shady or suspect or anything else in Catherine's past. Her father used to run the Red Lily Store, as you know. Her mother—her real mother—quite obviously must have been the nicest of women, because Catherine is sensitive, charming, well-mannered, generous--' He stopped with a wry smile. 'If I go on much longer you'll be getting

the wrong impression, won't you? Now what were you going to tell me about yourself, Rainbow?'

She paused for an instant, then said carefully, 'I told you my mother was Iris West from Kooriekirra cattle station, but I didn't ever tell you about my father.'

'No, you didn't, did you?' He smiled and touched the corner of her mouth with a gentle finger.

She thought of Guy and hesitated. Guy had hated the idea that her father had not been a—a gentleman. Would Jarratt care? She took a deep breath and said in a rush, 'He was a 'crocodile shooter. He was a—rough sort of man. My mother's parents wouldn't even accept him as their son-in- law.'

There was amusement in his eyes, and as well a kind of gentleness she had never seen there before. 'How do you know he was a rough man, Rainbow? I thought you didn't remember him.'

'No, but the man who looked after me till just lately— Jack Lane—he was a friend of my father's. He was a crocodile shooter once too, and he was—well, *he* was rough —but he was kind too,' she added loyally.

Jarry nodded. 'I know that,' he said casually. 'I knew Jack Lane. He was a fine type. He worked here once— maybe fifteen years ago. I often wondered what became of Jack's little girl Rainbow, and not so long ago I found out.'

Nicky's eyes widened and colour spread slowly into her cheeks. Her glance was locked with his, and once again she was a little girl sitting in the dust with aboriginal children. And a man was looking down at her as she bit into a fat creamy witchetty grub. A man with dark eyes. Jarratt Buchan--

'It was—you,' she said faintly.

'What are you remembering?' he asked.

'The—the witchetty grub,' she whispered.

He laughed a low laugh and pulled her into his arms. 'I'm glad you remember that. But what a woman you've grown into! I might have guessed—but never that I'd be asking you to marry me.' When he had finished kissing her again, he asked, 'What happened to Nick Reay, Rainbow?'

She looked at him, puzzled. 'My father? He was killed in a shooting accident. How did you know his name?'

'Because I met him once. When I was eighteen or nineteen, I took a holiday up at the Top End and joined a croc-shooting party. He was the man in charge.'

'Oh.' Nicky's face had gone white, and she stared at him without speaking.

'Your father was an Englishman, Rainbow—an adventurer. Young, daring—pioneer stuff. Pretty obviously he'd had a good education, but I don't know why he left home and came out to Australia. He must have been killed shortly after I met him, but I never heard about it. I have some photographs at home of that holiday—I'll show them to you later.'

'Thank you,' she said shakily. She wanted just a little to cry. Not because her father hadn't been as rough as Jack, but just because—everything was fitting together. Because she had two parents. Because Jarratt loved her. And as well, because of Cass—for Cass, real tears. She murmured, 'Poor Cass—she's the one who'll have her hair cut off after all.'

'What are you crying about?' Jarry kissed her eyes and smoothed back her curling hair. 'And what sort of nonsense are you talking now? Do you know I love you? And are you going to admit that you're wild about me—and that the sooner we get married the better?'

Nicky nodded, her face raised to his, and he put his arm protectively around her.

'Then shall we go and tell the others?' She held back a little, and he assured her gently, 'Catherine will have guessed. You're not afraid she won't wish you well?'

'No, of course not.' Cass would wish her well. And Nicky had a wish for Cass too. She spoke it aloud to Jarratt.

'I hope one day she'll be as happy—and as lucky in love—as we are.'

'I'll join you in that,' he agreed.